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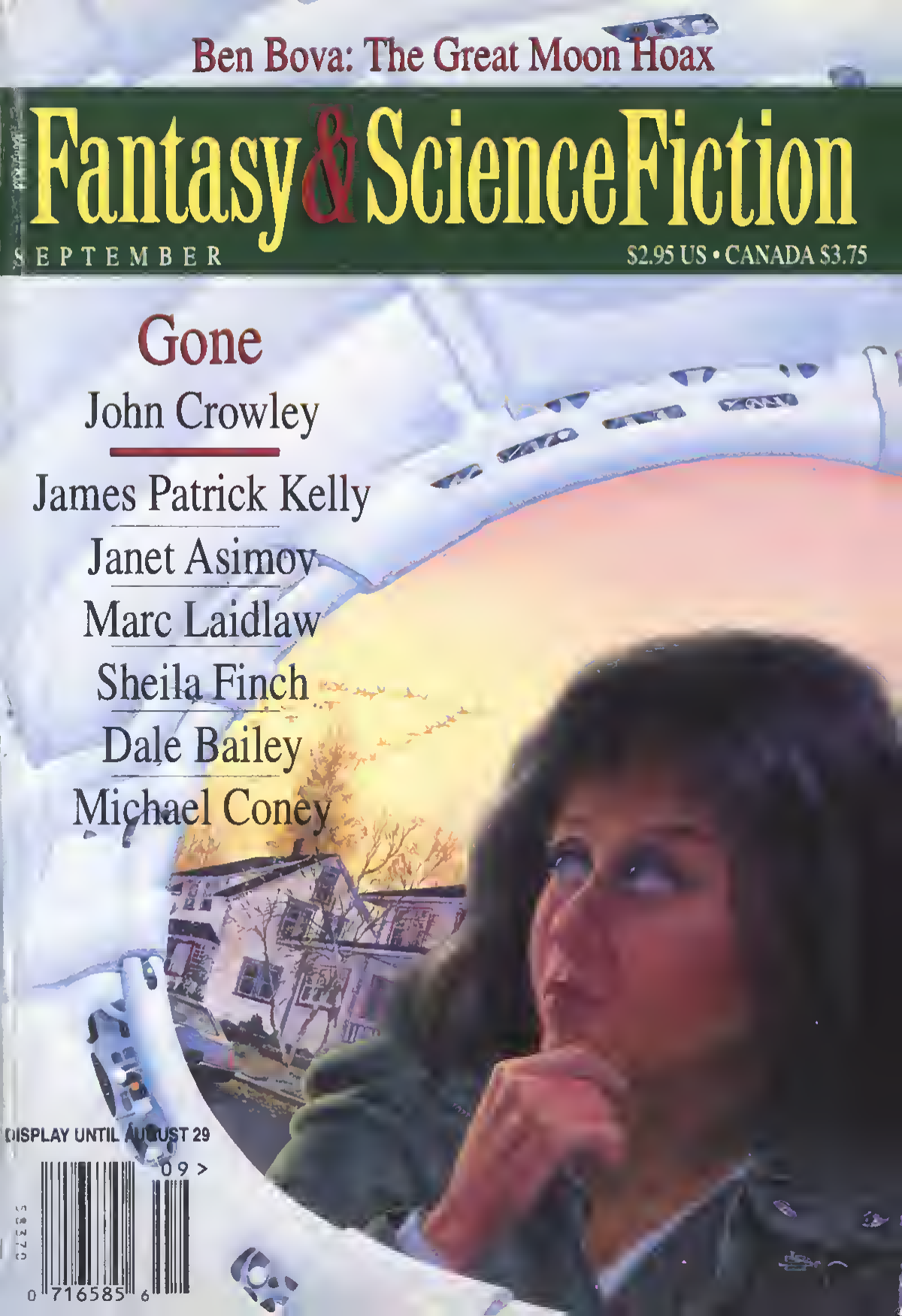
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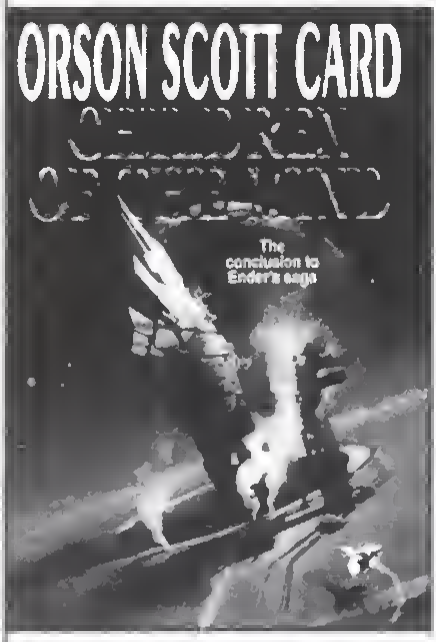


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CARTOONS: Bill Long (9, 33); Henry Martin (56, 70)
COVER BY BRYN BARNARD FOR "GONE."

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH, Editor
CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor — HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 91, No. 3, Whole No 544, September 1996. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2 95 per copy Annual subscription $29 90; $34.90 outside of the U.S (Canadian subscribers. please remit in U S. dollars) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd , West Cornwall, CT 06796 Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1996 by Mercury Press, Inc All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 420, LINCOLN CITY, OR 97367

EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN THE LAST few months, I've done a series of editorials on what the reader needs to know about publishing. In last month's installment, I promised I'd discuss book prices.

When I was a young girl in the late sixties, I got a five dollar per week allowance. I spent it all on books, which I bought at the local drugstore. Books, mind you. Not a single book. Every week, I brought home at least five novels, and had them read by the time the next week's allowance was due.

Now I wouldn't be able to buy a single paperback with that five dollars. Book prices have increased dramatically since then, and prices have risen two dollars per book since I published my first novel in 1991.

What's going on?

Returns, the great shame of the book industry, something that, so far, publishers are either powerless or unwilling to change. A bookstore may return any book ordered and receive full credit for that book. In the case of hardbacks, the store must return the entire copy. But in the case of paperbacks, the store need only return the cover to receive full credit for that book.

To anyone who has ever owned a retail business, this practice sounds like heaven. Most retailers are stuck with the stock they order. They must choose their products carefully, and sell those items that aren't popular for a significant discount (or in many cases, a significant loss). Not so in the book industry. A bookstore can return a book it ordered *and not be charged for that book*, so the store has no real responsibility. It often doesn't keep track of sales, make reasoned judgments about marketability of a title, or even (in some cases) consider shelf space when placing book orders.[1]

Every day, bookstores abuse this return policy in ways that cost

[1] Many independent bookstores have developed systems to keep track of inventory, however. Independents are often run by book lovers who refuse to strip books (or do so only because of economic necessity), and so they try to be responsible in their ordering.

all readers money. Chain bookstores are especially notorious, partly because of their business structure. The books for your local chains are ordered by a buyer. Some chains have regional buyers, but most have only one buyer per section, usually based in New York. So if the science fiction buyer purchases five copies of the latest Nebula winning novel for each of his stores, the stores will receive those five copies — whether they have room for them or not.[2]

Each chain store manager handles the problem differently. One manager that I know of strips half the books he receives even before he puts a copy on the shelf. Another manager I know never uncrates certain boxes of books, which means that some titles never have a chance to reach the shelf. While some stores do this on purpose, others do so by accident. During one particularly busy holiday season, a local chain bookstore didn't open any boxes of books received after December 15th because the store was simply too busy. The mistake was discovered when the following month's books arrived. Rather than opening the neglected boxes and putting the books on display, the store employees opened the boxes, stripped the books, and sent the covers back for credit.

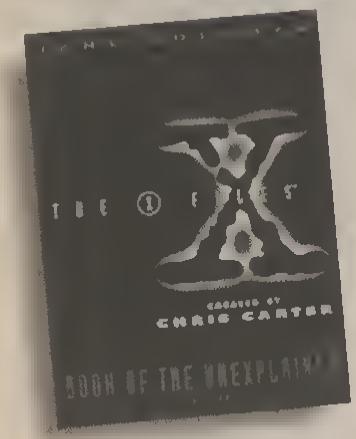
If this were an annual problem, the returns policy might not be so bad. But such practices happen every month. Remember that the average shelf life for a book is six to eight weeks. Unless the book sells well, it will be replaced by another book after that period of time. Which means this: if you glance in your favorite chain bookstore this month, realize that most of the paperbacks you currently see on the shelves will have their covers torn off and their contents thrown in the dumpster in two months. What you see on the shelf today will be in your landfill tomorrow.

Publishers deal with the return policy by jacking prices and fixing their profit and loss statements. Instead of hoping to sell all their inventory, publishers talk about "sell-through." A book with a fifty percent sell-through has done a moderate business, and often a publisher is happy with that. A fifty percent sell-through (which is average) means that for every copy sold, one was destroyed.

What this means for you, the consumer, is this: for every book

[2] Theoretically, the buyer is supposed to order by store size: for example, the buyer will buy two copies for a small store, five copies for a medium store, and ten copies for a large store. But a small store in Chicago might have a different layout than a small store in Moscow, Idaho, and the Idaho store may not have as much floor space.

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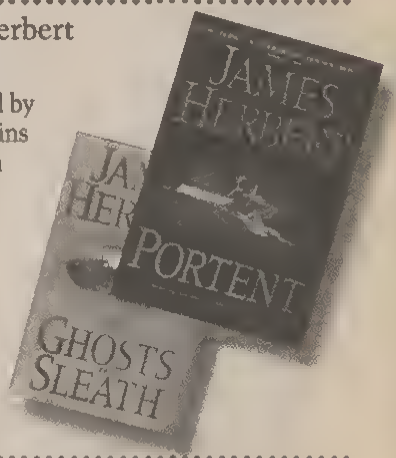
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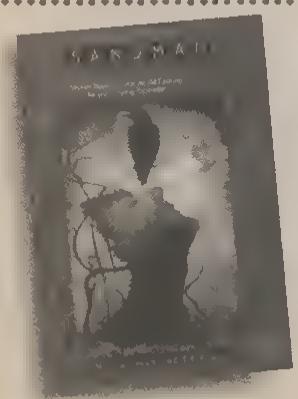
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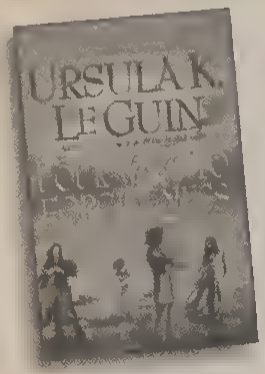
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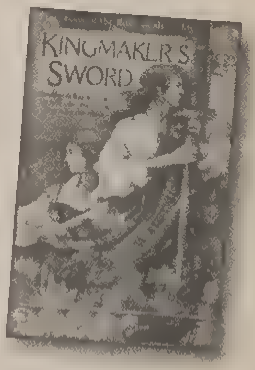
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THE SHIMMERING DOOR Katharine Kerr, editor

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you buy, you're paying the cost for two books. Publishing is a marginal industry. So when shipping costs go up, the cost of paper rises, or some other trend affects book manufacturing, the price has to be passed to the consumer immediately because publishing can't afford the change.

Logically, then, publishers should stop offering returns.[3] But changing the policy is not that easy. Some publishers have tried sending out certain books with modified returns or no returns. The company my husband and I started, Pulphouse Publishing, did not offer returns. Bookstores ignored the policy and returned books anyway.

Publishers can't just cancel the returns policy because bookstores will refuse to order from their companies. (And not just bookstores. Distributors will refuse to handle the publisher's wares at all.)[4] Publishers cannot act in unison because they would be violating antitrust laws. The first publisher to take this plunge takes a huge economic risk, one that could conceivably take a marginally profitable company into bankruptcy. Corporate decision-making does not allow executives to take this kind of gamble. Unless someone can figure out a way to put a cap on the number of returns (like the record industry does), we must live with this policy for the foreseeable future.[5]

There is little that we readers can do about the returns policy and its effect on rising book prices. But we can do a few things. First of all, if you hear of abusive bookstore practices, stop frequenting that bookstore. Store employees will often tell you (if you ask) whether or not they strip books before the books have an opportunity to be sold. Frequent the stores that try to keep their returns to a minimum.

If you see a stripped book (a book without a cover) realize that book is *stolen*. It was reported as unsold and destroyed by the bookstore. The store received credit for the book. Any place that routinely resells stripped books should be reported as selling stolen goods. Any bookstore employee who receives stripped books as a perk of employment is receiving stolen merchan-

[3] The history of the returns system is fascinating, but involved. I can't go into it here, but suffice to say that when the policy was introduced, it was a sound one. Decades of abuse, competition, and poor sales policies made it go awry.

[4] The collapse of the wholesale distribution system might cause some changes in returns and in book ordering in general, mainly in mass market paperbacks, but I have yet to see statistics (projected or otherwise) on the impact of this collapse in regards to returns.

[5] My husband believes that the change in the returns policy must come from outside the publishing industry. He hopes environmentalists will look at all this waste, and take action.

dise. Neither the publisher nor the author has received money for that stripped book — and consumers who buy books with covers are paying for this theft.

Such practices are common, and they must stop. A lot of people do not realize that stripped books are stolen merchandise. Tell them. Most book lovers will never touch a stripped book again once they understand.[6]

I doubt we'll ever be able to bring book prices back in line with those we saw as children. But I do hope that the industry solves both its pricing and its return prob-lems before books become more of a luxury item than they already are.

Next month, I'll talk a bit about industry perception, reviews, and at-titudes as they affect the books you find in your local bookstores. And remember to send me any questions you might have. I'll round out the December issue with those, and start the new year on a brand new topic. ☙

[6] Bookstore employees will often say they don't earn enough money to buy the stripped books they receive as perks. Remind those folks that libraries exist for people who can't afford to buy. Also, many independent bookstores loan employees books so that the employees can read and recommend things.



It's been six years since Sheila Finch's work graced our pages. Her last appearance was "Cyberella" in July of 1990. "Communion of Minds" is one of several stories Sheila has written about the Guild of Xenolinguists. An earlier lingster story, "A World Waiting," appeared in August of 1989. We have two more in inventory, one of them a cover story.

Communion of Minds

By Sheila Finch

"SOMEONE DOWN THERE!" Jaez announced.

Greer Yancy leaned toward the forward port to see where the shuttle pilot pointed. "Where?"

Before Jaez could answer, Dedrick shoved her aside and crowded against the pilot's shoulder. He'd already taken off his seat-web, claiming the too-tight webbing dug into his flesh. The man ate shipboard food with as little discrimination as a pig, Greer thought, having sat at table with him for six weeks.

"Don't see anything!" Dedrick complained.

"Two o'clock position. Right in front of those low, bushy things," the pilot said. "Something wrong, though. He's moving peculiar."

She managed to get a glimpse beneath Dedrick's raised arm. They were now skimming the planet's surface at the level of spindly, tree-like growths, over a narrow landing-strip. On the ground in a patch of brilliant sunlight, she saw a figure waving at them. Or maybe shooing them away.

The gesture was oddly spastic, open to interpretation. Then the figure broke into a halting run as if he wasn't in complete control of his limbs, darting across the clearing and disappearing into trees.

Greer scanned the surface for ents — friendly or otherwise. Bridging the chasm between human and alien languages was a routine task for a xenolinguist assigned to a starship, even a freighter like tbe *City of São Paulo*. Too routine. This rescue mission — in response to a fragmented distress call the *São Paulo* had picked up — was the most promising event of a two-year voyage. She braced herself against the seat-web and prepared for touchdown.

The shuttle landed, then rolled to the brief line of trees that marked the margin of the sandy clearing. Thin as broomsticks, they rose naked for perhaps thirty feet, then suddenly sprouted spiky tops like fistfuls of scarlet knives, a color so vivid it hurt her eyes. Other than sparse clumps of the neon-hued trees and low, thorny growths resembling purple tangles of barbed wire, the planet was dun-colored. Beautiful in its arid way, she thought, rather like her native Mojave Desert in mid-August.

"Yuck!" Dedrick said. "Who the hell picked this dump for a colony?"

Dedrick was middle-aged, a successful engineer who rated everything on a planet in terms of its suitability for building bridges, dams, aqueducts, hydroelectric power plants. At dinner every night, he'd boasted about disasters and accidents on projects that he'd survived by a combination of skill and nerves.

"Research group," Iversen put in. The fourth member of the hastily assembled rescue team was small, soft-spoken, younger than Greer, a medtech on his first assignment who so far hadn't faced a situation more serious than the upset stomachs of the *São Paulo's* crew. "Astronomers and astrophysicists, Library says."

"What'd they do?" Dedrick said sourly. "Run out of sunblock?"

Jaez opened the shuttle's hatch. A blast of hot, dry air hit them, tinged with a rusty, iron smell like blood.

The man who'd waved at them suddenly reappeared. He was over six feet tall and thin to the point of emaciation. His dark hair and beard were long and unkempt, and his clothes looked as if they'd once belonged to someone much shorter. His movements fascinated her. He seemed to be trying to come forward and move back at the same time, each limb

obeying a different order and then contradicting it in mid-motion, like someone who'd lost the automatic control functions of his brain and had to move each part by conscious thought.

"Neurological damage," Iversen observed.

"Frigging lunatic!" Dedrick said. "Christ! It's hotter than hell down here."

He pushed past Jaez to stand at the top of the ramp. Jaez muttered under his breath. The veteran pilot's dislike of the engineer had been obvious from the first. Dedrick had insisted his skills would be useful to the crew on this mission. To Jaez's dismay, the captain had agreed.

"H — H — Hi!" the tall man said. His mouth worked crazily as he spoke. "Th — Th — Thank G — G — God that you c — came! Didn't th — think m — message w —w —would get — "

He seemed at war with himself. Trained to pick up the nuances of movement and gesture that reinforced or contradicted speech, meanings skewed out of the ordinary, Greer thought his body struggled to undermine what his tongue wanted to say.

"We're here to help you, pal!" Dedrick stood at the bottom of the ramp, wiping sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. "Tell me what you need."

"Where's everybody else?" the young medtech asked.

"D — Dead," the man said. "All dead. Th — Thirty men and w — w — women. I — I — I am the l — last — "

He broke off as if the effort were too great.

"Jesus!" Iversen said.

Jaez moved down the ramp and deliberately placed himself between the tall man and Dedrick. "My God, man! What happened here?"

Now the man shook his head, an alarming gesture that seemed capable of unhinging the head entirely from his neck. "Crops all d — died. Nothing grew. C — Can't eat the native f — f —"

"Native flora?" Jaez guessed.

"Native viruses a problem?" Iversen asked.

It seemed a good guess to Greer. The reaction the medtech's question provoked startled her.

"N — N — No! No! No d — d — disease! This — This is — Tried to — Tried to ee — ee — eat — Rats! Tried —"

He stopped suddenly, arms still in mid-gesture, mouth slack. The shuttle's crew stared at him. Seconds blinked by.

Then he moved again, and it was as if they were looking at a different person.

"Sorry," he said, hands relaxed against his hips. "I have these unfortunate — episodes, for lack of a better word. Name's Jim Sharnov."

After a moment's hesitation, Jaez introduced the team. They stood awkwardly now in the fierce sun, none of them sure what to do first. The talk turned to the colony in trouble.

"We ran out of food. Nothing we brought with us would grow here," Sharnov said. "And our systems didn't tolerate the native vegetation."

"Hostile ents too?" Iversen asked.

"No. No aliens at all."

"That lets you out," Dedrick said to Greer. "Too bad! I'd hoped to get to see you do some work for once."

She knew he was scornful of the Guild's work. Well, so was she right now. She'd expected so much more of her career — adventure, excitement, a chance to make a difference. How juvenile her ambitions seemed now. The Guild had been too successful; there were no adventures left for a lingster in the Orion Arm. Certainly not one so untalented that she'd graduated bottom of the class.

Something brushed against her shin; she glanced down. A large dog with thin, matted coat and prominent rib cage gazed up at her. It looked sick. She moved a few inches away.

"Where'd that come from?" Jaez asked.

"That's Sammy," Sharnov said. He smiled as if he'd learned to pull up the corners of his mouth but not to experience any emotion behind the gesture. "We weren't supposed to bring pets along, but one of the women smug-gled him in her personal luggage. He was only a puppy then, of course."

"Hey — I like dogs!" Iversen said. But he made no move to touch it.

The dog flopped down on the coarse sand, large amber eyes staring at Greer.

"We brought some food supplies," Jaez said. "Not much, though. Couldn't tell what you might need. But we'll get you a meal right away."

"I'm all right," Sharnov said.

"But you look —"

"I said I'm all right!"

Jaez opened his mouth to reply. Shut it again.

"So how'd *you* manage to survive when the others didn't?" Dedrick wanted to know.

Sharnov's mouth pulled sideways in an odd grin. "Guess I'm better at adapting."

"We couldn't see your compound coming in," Iversen said.

"South of here — about a kilometer. In a larger stand of trees for shade."

The dog whined softly at her. She overcame her reluctance and stroked the fur behind his ears. She'd had plenty of dogs as a child, hybrids most of them, products of domestic bitches in heat and amorous coyotes that roamed the desert she'd grown up in. They'd had a lot to offer that pure-breeds lacked. This dog was about the size of a labrador, with a short, brindled coat and drooping ears. His eyes were huge and luminous.

"Ought to search for possible survivors anyway," Jaez said. "Iversen, go ahead with Doctor Sharnov. Dedrick — "

But Dedrick was already striding away with the other two. Jaez muttered at the engineer's retreating back, then opened the cargo hatch and contemplated the meager emergency supplies they'd brought with them. She felt embarrassed for him, but it wasn't her job to put Dedrick in his place.

She strapped on the small field pack that contained the vials of neurotransmitters every Guild lingster used when working. She obviously wasn't going to need it here, but training dictated it not be left behind.

The dog followed her to the compound which was hidden in a denser stand of the broomstick trees; she didn't see it until she was almost on top of it. She doubted the sparse foliage offered much real shade to the small group of low buildings.

When she reached the first hut, Sharnov leaned out the doorway, bowing, the rictus grin on his face again.

"Welcome to my humble home."

Again his oddness prickled. She went past him into the interior where Dedrick and Iversen were inspecting a rumpled printout. The hut contained little other than a folding table where an old computer terminal sat

beside a pile of empty dishes. Probably too old to do the work a lingster would need to achieve interface, she thought. Just as well there were no indigenous entities around.

It was cooler in here than outside but not much; the air was stale, carrying the faint traces of decay. Looking up, she saw gaping holes in the roof through which the sun poked arrows of light. Jaez followed her and set down the small crate just inside the doorway.

"Look at this," Iversen said.

"I want you two to make a sweep of this compound," Jaez said. "Make *certain* there's nobody else here. Don't want to leave anybody behind."

"Take a look at this first!" Iversen pointed to an entry.

"D — D — Damned c — cur!"

Startled, she glanced round in time to see Sharnov kick the dog in the ribs. The mongrel yelped sharply and jumped away from the man's twitching leg.

"G — G — Get away from m — me! Leave m — m — me alone!"

Sharnov appeared to be in the throes of a seizure. His entire body spasmed; his mouth opened and shut, gulping air; his eyes rolled back in his head. The dog raced away, tail between his legs, almost knocking down Jaez who still stood in the doorway.

Then the jerking movements stopped. The man turned away from the fleeing dog and spoke almost apologetically.

"He brought fleas with him."

SHARNOV WAS ONLY pretending to eat.

Greer studied him; in the absence of ents, she applied her training to observe this strange human. The scientist held the nutriwafer to his lips, his jaw moved, but she was certain no crumb entered his mouth. She'd heard of starving men lacking strength to eat, but the man who'd aimed that kick hadn't been weak.

"You mentioned 'rats' earlier," she said. "Some kind of little animal?"

Sharnov stared at her blankly.

"That's right," Iversen agreed. "When we first got here. You said 'Rats.'"

"You obviously misunderstood," Sharnov said.

The medtech looked as if he were about to say something, then thought better of it.

"There's nothing that big around here," Sharnov said. "A few bugs. Otherwise, not much."

That couldn't be true, she thought. Obviously the dog had found something to keep himself alive when the food ran out.

"Elsewhere, perhaps?" Jaez mused. "In other climate zones?"

"We came to do astrophysics. Not zoology."

Greer watched Sharnov. She was certain she was right: he wasn't actually eating anything. He did, however, reach for a cup of water and lift it to his lips. When he set it down again, his eyes met hers over the empty cup. She'd seen that intense, flat gaze before, in the eyes of saints and lunatics. Which one was he, she wondered?

The hut was a furnace even though the planet's sun now hung low in the sky. No power to run the air conditioner or the computer anymore, Sharnov explained. After a while, he excused himself and went outside.

Jaez and Iversen talked over what they'd found so far: Every building in the compound had been ruined except this one. A few steps away, Sharnov had indicated the shallow graves of famine victims. The colonists' logbooks they'd found in other huts corroborated Sharnov's story of unexpected failure of crops brought from home, the experiments with native plants that proved worthless because humans couldn't process alien protein. There were no more survivors.

But most puzzling of all was an entry in one log that hinted the colonists had died by their own hands.

"Maybe they thought that was better than waiting for the inevitable," Jaez suggested.

"Don't like this planet!" Iversen said. "I grew up by the North Sea. Give me snow any day."

"Don't know why they didn't eat the dog," Dedrick observed.

"Shut up!" Jaez said, anger smoldering in his dark eyes.

Iversen interrupted smoothly, defusing the tension rising between the two. "No meat on the dog, anyway. But the sooner we take off the better. Makes my flesh creep down here!"

Jaez was still glowering at Dedrick. "Don't have enough supplies to

stay long. But we don't want to miss any important data that might explain what happened here. Let's get going!"

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Jaez smiled at her. "Not much work here for a lingster, Greer. You're in luck."

The men went outside.

Twilight had spread dull red shadows over the barren ground, pooling like blood in the ruts made by the colony's vehicles and abandoned equipment. Everything was shattered and rusting. A line of radar dishes lurched off into the distance, tilting crazily, broken struts angling. The heat still hammered mercilessly.

Unless a lingster was actively working, Guild rules said, evening was the time to practice the emergency protocols. She'd had a lot of time for practice. Maybe it was time to recognize she'd never amount to much as a lingster. She had no special talents. That was why she'd ended up assigned to a freighter; nobody else wanted her. Maybe it was time to leave the Guild.

The mongrel sat patiently outside Sharnov's hut, first scratching himself, then licking the sore place. Fleas, Sharnov had.said. And would they give rise to the same cycle of parasites when their eggs were ingested as they did on Earth? A poster seen in a veterinary office on a long-ago trip with one of the coyote-half-breeds came to her mind, detailing all the stages of mutation from surface flea to intestinal worm. The dog's emaciation suggested worms. Another reason she was reluctant to touch him.

Something crashed to the ground near the hut.

Sharnov stood by the water tank a few yards away from the hut, holding an ax. He appeared to be wrestling with himself. The ax swung wildly, sometimes grazing the edge of the tank, sometimes missing his own leg narrowly. Pipes that had led out of the tank lay broken and scattered over the ground at its base.

"Hey!" She started to run toward him. "What're you doing?"

He got in another swing. The blade rang against metal. Then he jerked to face her.

She slowed, suddenly aware of the non-existent protection of her thin clothing. His body was jittering as if he had a severe case of palsy.

Anger and agony skidded across his face in turn.

"Are you all right?"

Stupid question! She stood far enough away to run if he should decide to aim the ax at her. The dog growled.

Sharnov shuddered and collapsed to his knees. She ought to call Iversen. But before she could get the medtech's name out, Sharnov pushed himself up again. She stared as he dusted the dirt off his clothes.

Then he gave her that emotionless smile. "Must be the heat."

"Is there — I mean, there *must* be something wrong?"

"Why do you say that?"

"The way you've been acting. It's obvious something's the matter."

His mouth twitched at one corner. "No."

Iversen and Jaez came running toward them.

"What's up?" Jaez demanded.

"We heard something," Iversen said. "Everything okay?"

"You took a r — risk, coming d — down h —he — here," Sharnov said. His face muscles twitched.

"Well, yes, but — " Iversen said.

"Anything could h — happen. Any th — thing at all."

"Like what?" Jaez said.

Sharnov didn't answer, but his lips were spasming again. Greer knew his tight mouth was holding in the stuttering voice that gave something away he didn't want known.

"Maybe you'd better let me take a look at you?" the medtech said.

Sharnov stalked away between the ruined buildings of the compound, his gaunt shadow stretching before him.

"What the hell's wrong with that guy?" Jaez said.

"Seems sick, to me," Iversen said, his voice rising. "Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to take him back up until we're sure? What if it's something contagious? I don't have much experience with alien viruses."

Jaez shook his head. "Keep your voice down!"

There was danger here, but she couldn't define its contours. No point in saying anything to Jaez just yet. Sammy whined softly and trotted after her.

The tree trunks were in darkness by the time she arrived at the top of a little rise, only their spikes luminously crimson in the slow sunset. A

subtle, quick realignment of shadows caught her eye. At the base of one of the trees something small and shiny black scuttled out of sight. She sat down on the warm earth, resting her back against one of the trees. Sammy lay down with a sigh beside her.

The irony of it was, she'd loved every minute of her xenolinguist training; she just hadn't been very good at it. She'd relished the excitement of the always-present element of danger when an interface opened between alien languages. *Never let emotion color the interface,* the Guild taught. That way lay psychological breakdown. And sometimes, the resulting storm of the unfiltered universe swept the unwary lingster away into madness. One of the first lessons was the emergency protocols. Most lingsters hoped they'd never have to use them; Greer had hoped she would.

She closed her eyes. *Step One: Let go, let go of fear, let go of anger....*

After a while, she opened her eyes, relaxed and refreshed. Like meditation, practice of the protocols steadied and rested the mind.

Now the land was flooded with gray moonlight from the nearer of the planet's two satellites. From where she sat, she could see the shadowy humps of the compound, and farther away the shuttle. Twilight shrouded its contours.

She sat up; her eyes had caught a gleam in the shuttle's interior. Perhaps Jaez had gone back to fetch something. Whatever it was, the light was extinguished now. Absently, she patted the dog's head.

Although at first she'd been struck by the planet's superficial resemblance to her native desert, it was eerily different at night. In the Mojave, her sensitive ears would've picked up the tiny flutterings of night birds, the squeak of small rodents hunting in darkness, and the soft pad of predators that preyed on them. Here the night was utterly silent.

She jumped as something throbbed. The noise came from the direction of the parked shuttle. Scrambling to her feet, she stared in confusion as the craft suddenly rolled forward, gained speed, then leaped up into the night sky. She stumbled down the little hill toward the compound, the dog at her heels. Thorny bushes whipped her ankles and stung her hands.

Jaez, Iversen and Dedrick stood open-mouthed in the doorway of Sharnov's hut, staring at the vanishing starspeck of the shuttle.

"He left us! He goddamned left us!" Iversen said.

"He won't get far," Jaez said grimly. "I code-locked the nav-com. Force of habit!"

The starspeck went nova as they watched.

THE RADIO transmitter which had beamed the original distress signal up to the *City of São Paulo* had been destroyed. They stood in the roofless communications hut at sunrise, staring at the tangled wreckage.

"You're an engineer," Jaez said to Dedrick. "Fix it!"

"How'n hell do I do that? The bastard totalled it!"

"Try!"

"If you hadn't been so goddamned clever locking the nav-com, we wouldn't *need* a transmitter!"

"Anybody knew anything about shuttles, they'd have known immediately not to take off. How was I to know — "

"Your captain would've guessed something was wrong the minute that asshole stepped out of the shuttle. Now he'll think we blew ourselves up!"

"It's done now!" Jaez shouted. "We need another solution!"

The day promised to be unbearably hot and the only shelter was Sharnov's hut. Tempers had been getting worse as the sun rose and their desperate situation sank in. Greer wondered how long it would be before they began slugging each other.

"I don't understand why he did it," Iversen said. "Why couldn't he wait?"

"Maybe he thought we'd find out he murdered all the others," Jaez suggested grimly.

"He made damn sure we wouldn't be radioing the news any time soon!" Dedrick muttered.

"Maybe there're parts stashed somewhere," Jaez said. "Or maybe you can cannibalize something."

"I'll do what I can." Dedrick moved irritably about the com-hut, the sour stink of his sweat trailing him. "Don't want to stay down here eating those goddamned nutriwafers!"

"Damn well have to if we don't figure out something before the *São Paulo* leaves orbit," Jaez said.

"It scares me," Iversen said. "You ask me, there's something about this place. Some reason he didn't want to be around when we found out."

Dedrick scowled at the young medtech. "Got to have some organization if we're going to survive. Iversen, you — "

"Wait a minute," Jaez said. "I have command here."

Dedrick turned his back on the pilot. "Make a ration plan for the food and water, Iversen. Have to be tight. Don't know how long it's going to take me to rebuild a transmitter."

Iversen shook his head glumly but moved out of the hut.

"Yancy, you — "

Jaez grabbed Dedrick's arm. "Something wrong with your hearing, Dedrick?"

The big man swatted the pilot's hand off as if it were a fly and looked at Greer. "You take search detail. Round up anything — absolutely anything! — we could use. Don't bother your pretty little blonde head second-guessing. Just bring it all to me."

"Ignore that, Greer!" Jaez said. "I'll give the orders."

"How're your building skills, Jaez? Can a pilot patch a roof? Could be here for a while. Going to need better shade."

Jaez swung at him but missed as the engineer stepped away.

She caught Jaez's arm as he prepared to try again. "Arturo! Let's just get on with surviving until someone comes for us."

Jaez scowled but followed her advice, leaving her alone with Dedrick.

She gave Dedrick a hard stare. "You're not making the best use of your personnel, Dedrick."

"How's that?"

"Someone ought to be hunting up new sources of water."

"This is a desert, Yancy, in case you haven't noticed."

"I understand a *hydroengineer* might find it hopeless. But these plants are getting water somewhere. Probably underground sources."

He gazed at her. "Think you can find 'em?"

She nodded.

"So what're you waiting for? *I'll* take scavenger detail. Maybe I'll find something useful."

Sammy was outside again, waiting. He walked beside her as she set off toward a clump of trees.

* * *

The food ran out on the fourth day, in spite of Iversen's careful rationing. Greer suspected Dedrick had something to do with that.

Dedrick had given up trying to repair the transmitter and the generator, both smashed to pieces along with the contents of the huts and the buildings themselves. *"Looks like they had a war going on here,"* Jaez had commented. *"Can't see how starving people had the strength to do something like this."*

"Or why," Iversen had put in. The younger man's face was gray, the skin stretched taut over his bones with strain.

She sat in the sparse midday shade of the punctured water tank, trying to keep distance between herself and Dedrick. Sammy lay at the edge of the shade. Apparently he didn't suffer from the sun's burning rays as much as she did. She watched him absently scratch one ear. Something that had bothered her when she first met the skeletal dog came back into her mind. He continued to live while the colonists had died.

"Sammy? Are you catching rats?" Maybe if there was something on this planet he could eat, they could too.

The dog swiveled a long ear to listen to her, but his gaze was off into the distance.

"Yancy!"

Dedrick stood over her, sweating profusely. He was holding her fieldpack in one hand.

"These work like vitamins? Got to eat something."

"Give them back, Dedrick. They're not food."

"Yeah? Well I've heard what you lingsters take when you're working. Maybe a few psychedelics would help pass the time."

"You're a fool. They'd kill you."

"Rather I ate the dog? Going to have to, some day soon."

As if he understood Dedrick's words, Sammy growled.

"Maybe you should build some traps. Catch the rats that Sammy's obviously eating."

"What rats? Nothing like that here. Sharnov said so."

"He had to be wrong. Sammy's eating *something* — "

"Dogs like that don't need much food. Had hounds when I was a kid. Used to forget to feed 'em for days. They managed."

Stay calm, she told herself. Anger only depleted her limited energy. "You could at least *try*."

"What you want me to put in 'em, once I get 'em built? Cheese?" He tossed the pouch away and slouched off.

She heard the crack of glass as the pouch spilled its contents on the ground.

The traps Dedrick built out of salvaged scraps and baited with insects and bits of vegetation stayed empty.

On Iversen's advice, they conserved energy by moving around as little as possible. If they had to go out in the daytime, they covered their heads and bodies in blankets and cloths stripped from the abandoned huts. At midday on the eighth day, they were lying in Sharnov's hut, hardly able to breathe because of the stifling heat full of body odors, but glad for shelter from the burning sun. Dedrick had rolled up his bush jacket to support his head, revealing dark patches of sweat under his armpits.

"Damn!" Dedrick said. "I can taste roast beef."

"An enchilada — that's what I crave," Jaez said.

"Baked potato with butter and sour cream and chives."

"Or perhaps a tamale — "

They'd rapidly exhausted the meager amount of water she'd been able to find. If she could summon the strength, she should go back out into the desert and search again. The surface might be baked rock-hard, but like the Mojave, there had to be underground sources that fed the broomstick trees and the barbed-wire shrubs. Her father had taught her the basic elements of survival when she was young, a necessary skill for a kid who'd thought the desert was her own backyard.

Jaez stirred. "Where's Iversen?"

"Who the hell cares?" Dedrick muttered.

The pilot's anxiety infected her. She tried to remember when she'd last seen Iversen. Soon after sun-up, she decided, when she'd awakened from a dream of eating in the refectory of the Guild's Mother House on Earth — mounds of crusty bread — sweet butter — creamy cheeses — apples and pears piled high in a polished wooden bowl. The young medtech had been sitting up beside her, staring out the door at the red-

streaked dawn sky. *"They're not coming back for us,"* he'd said. *"Captain'll think we died in the shuttle explosion."*

Jaez struggled to sit up, disturbing the dog as he did. Sammy had taken to lying with them in the hut, his head by her feet.

"Ought to kill that dog and roast it," Dedrick grumbled, his eyes following the dog out of the hut into the blast of sunlight. "Lot of people consider dog meat a delicacy."

"Shut up!" Jaez said.

"Marrow in the bones should be good."

Jaez scrambled to his knees. "Gotta find Iversen."

"Wait until the sun goes down, Arturo," she advised.

"May be too late. He could die — "

"So could you."

"Let him go," Dedrick said. "One less to feed."

The pilot shot him a look of pure hatred. But he lay back down beside her and they both drowsed off again. This time she dreamed of roast goose and baked apples with cream — midwinter celebration in the snowbound Mother House.

At nightfall, they found Iversen's body just outside the wrecked shell of the communications hut, his wrists slit. Dried blood caked the ground where he lay, a scalpel in his fingers. Dedrick pried it loose.

BACK IN THE HUT, Jaez and Dedrick argued about the need to bury Iversen. Bugs would do the job in time, Dedrick said. Hours later, he got up and went outside.

She lay with her head at the door of the hut, watching the first blood-stained fingers of dawn on the horizon. To take her mind off the death that waited for her, she thought about the planet and the doomed colony. There was a puzzle here whose solution — if she could only fit the pieces together — would yield a way out. It was hard to concentrate, she felt so weak and exhausted.

The dog licked her hand. It was comforting to have him playing the role of friend and protector canines had assumed since the beginning of history. Sammy scratched himself vigorously. Fleas, she thought. And rats. Rats carried fleas and fleas carried the Black Plague. Was that the

answer? Had the colony died of some unknown plague? But Sharnov denied it was disease that killed them.

Something about the dog. One of the puzzle pieces. He'd been little more than skin and bones when she first saw him. But he seemed no worse now. How was he managing to stay alive?

"Arturo," she said. "Have you ever seen this dog hunting?"

Jaez mumbled something. Alarmed, she glanced at the pilot. He was in bad shape, his brown face turning yellow. But he managed a feeble grin as she raised her water container to his lips.

"He has to be finding something to eat, but I never see him do it."

As if he understood her words, Sammy slapped his tail against the dusty floor of the hut.

A shadow fell over her head. She glanced up and saw Dedrick in the doorway. Immediately, the dog's hackles rose and he crouched beside her as if ready to spring at the man's throat.

"Bugs got him already. He was crawling with 'em." Dedrick said. "Couldn't use a damn thing."

"What you...talking...'bout?" Jaez said, his voice a painful wheeze from a parched throat.

"Stupid to let it go to waste."

Then she saw what he was holding in his left hand. She screamed.

The engineer looked down at Iversen's severed hand that he was holding by the thumb. Clotted blood showed at the wrist, but it had been cleanly cut. The medtech's scalpel glinted in the top pocket of Dedrick's bush jacket.

"Long bones would've been better." Dedrick swayed tiredly on his feet as he spoke. "Supposed to taste like pork. This is pretty dry. Couldn't get the bugs off the rest of him."

Jaez struggled up. "You...sick bastard!"

Dedrick tossed Iversen's hand aside. "He stank already. Better to use fresh."

She suddenly realized he'd been holding his right arm behind his back. She struggled to her knees just as the hand came slowly round, shaking with effort. Dedrick had a laser gun.

"Where you...get...that?" Jaez croaked, his eyes wide.

"Found it. Under the floor in one of the huts. Just didn't tell you about it."

"Put it...down!" Jaez ordered.

"Found something else. Transponder they hadn't smashed up. Works, too. Somebody'll pick up its signal, sooner or later. Just got to stay alive until then."

"How...gonna...do that?"

"Got to eat," Dedrick said.

A brilliant sliver of light streaked across her retinas. The dog howled. When she recovered, she saw Jaez sprawled at Dedrick's feet. Now the engineer had the scalpel in his hand.

"Arturo!"

"Save your breath." Dedrick tore the pilot's thin uniform tunic. "He was on the way out anyway. Anybody could see that." He went to work with the scalpel. "Liver's the best part for quick energy."

She turned away just in time to prevent herself from vomiting all over Jaez's body.

"Got to build a fire and cook this meat before it spoils," Dedrick said later. "Soon as the day cools off."

She didn't answer him. She was sitting on the floor in a corner, knees hugged tight to her chin, feeling numb, drifting in and out of sleep. The cloyingly sweet smell of fresh meat hung in the still air.

Sammy huddled beside her, his eyes following every move Dedrick made.

His meal seemed to have revived the engineer's strength. "Don't know why you're so squeamish. The Incas used to eat the liver and heart of their enemies. Or was it the Aztecs? Didn't taste too bad. A bit strong. More like old moo-cow than beef cattle."

She covered her ears.

"You do what you've got to do to survive."

"I'd rather die!"

"You won't have much choice. I'm just trying to help."

He sat down across from her. Sammy growled and she tightened her fingers in his matted coat.

"We could've started with the dog," Dedrick observed. "But there's not much meat on it."

Her fingers felt tendons in the dog's shoulder moving, the fur on his neck rising.

"So we would've ended up at this point anyway."

"Why don't you shut up?"

He turned a puzzled expression toward her. "I don't get your problem, lady. I'm aiming to get us out of here alive. But it's going to take time, and meanwhile we need to eat. Jaez was dying anyway. You got a better idea?"

The dog trembled under her fingers, every muscle taut with concentration. She glanced down at him and the yellow eyes turned to gaze back at her.

She could have sworn she heard him say, *Wait.*

Hunger was already causing hallucinations, she thought wildly. She had to stay rational. She dug her fingernails deep into her palms, the pain shocking her out of the dream-like state she'd been drifting into. She took several deep breaths and considered the situation.

Dedrick had found a transponder that worked. For a moment, she felt almost hopeful. Then reality set in again: She was already severely weakened — But she could never bring herself to touch human flesh — So she'd be dead by the time a ship came.

If one ever did.

Dedrick stood up. He leaned over her. "I'm going out to collect wood for a fire. If you change your mind, I left some meat already cut up."

Sammy stood too, growling, daring him to touch Greer.

"Forget it, mutt!" Dedrick gazed at Greer for a moment. "I never cared for nuns anyhow."

The dog snarled.

"Ought to shoot that thing right now." His hand moved to his belt where he'd stuck the gun.

Sammy leaped at his throat.

He screamed and went down under the dog. The gun slid out of his grasp and clattered on the floor. Dedrick and the dog rolled over and over as if they were playing. She pulled herself out of shock and reached for the gun which lay a few feet from her hand.

"Get the fucking thing off — "

The words turned into a sickening gurgle. She stood up, holding the gun with both hands. The engineer and the dog lurched against Jaez's partially dismembered body. The dog was shaking the man like a terrier with a rat.

She closed her eyes. Forced herself to open them again. Aimed —

Before she could fire, there was a small sigh — and Dedrick's head flopped back, the neck broken. He lay still, next to the body of his victim. The dog pulled away and shook himself. Drops of blood flew off his jaws and spattered the wall.

She thought she was going to vomit again, but there was nothing left in her stomach to come up.

SHE WOKE FROM A DREAM of eating trout her father had caught on a camping trip when she was ten. The taste of fish remained on her tongue. She could still smell the wood smoke, still feel the warmth of the campfire.

She was sitting against the wall, legs stretched in front of her. Sammy sat beside her, his breath warm on her cheek as she opened her eyes.

"Eat me," the dog said. His mouth didn't move.

She'd gone beyond hallucination. She was dying.

The dog tilted his head, ears alert as if she'd spoken aloud. "Not necessary to die," he said. "Eat me. Gain strength. Wait to be rescued."

"What — are you?" Her voice croaked in her dry throat.

The big mongrel bared his teeth in a canine smile. "Friend!"

She groaned and closed her eyes. Almost instantly sleep pulled her back to the frying fish.

When she woke again, it was evening in the hut and the dog had moved a little way off. He sat upright, paws placed neatly together, staring at her. Something glinted on the floor in the twilight and she lowered her head to look.

The scalpel lay by her feet.

She snatched her feet away and hugged her knees as if the thing would burn.

"I offer a way."

"Dogs can't talk!"

The dog blinked slowly at her but said nothing.

"I'm delirious — because I'm starving."

Imaginary conversation with a dog was more exhausting than she would've supposed. The dog was an alien, she thought. No — the alien was a dog —

It didn't matter. Sleep dragged her down again.

When she woke, she had no idea how much time had passed. She felt as if her head were stuffed with something gray and sticky. Thoughts came in slow motion. It took effort just to look down. The scalpel was lying right under her fingertips. Without thinking, she closed her fingers over it. Then she looked at Sammy. He returned her gaze steadily.

At the other side of the hut, the pilot's body was crawling with long, metallic gray bugs. She didn't look to see if this was happening to Dedrick too. Her gorge rose at the thought.

She had to do something to stay sane. *Think*! she told herself. *Think, if you want to get out of this alive*!

Something had happened to the scientists in this colony. They'd gone mad, smashed everything around them to pieces, then they'd killed themselves. Sharnov had acted as if he were mad, but Sharnov hadn't died. There was a missing piece.

Thinking exhausted her. She leaned her head back against the wall and stared at the patched ceiling of the hut. The pattern of twilight and purple shadow looked like a grape vine loaded with fruit. Memory served up the taste of their thick, sweet juice to torment her.

Something moved in a dark corner of the hut. Paused. Scuttled away. She caught sight of a stubby gray body, long snout, no visible ears, an extra pair of legs. No tail. Sammy growled.

The hut now held the cloying smell of two rapidly decomposing bodies. She would have to do something soon before the rats ate them.

But her mind veered off on another tangent. Aliens reproduced in all manner of ways. Some she'd seen needed a host to nurture their young, like the Terran spider that laid her eggs in a live but immobilized wasp. If the colonists had been used like the wasp — but not immobilized — it might explain the destructive spree they went on before they died.

It would be so easy to go to sleep...slip quietly away...

The smell of frying bacon filled the hut — she shook herself awake again. She saw the faces of famine victims on a war-ravaged planet, sitting apathetically by a dusty road, ribs poking out from the skin, eyes glazed and sunken. It had never occurred to her that in their minds they might fantasize about food.

Sammy licked her face. She forced herself to sit up straighter. There

had to be a way out of this. She had to survive until a ship came.

Her hand still grasped the scalpel.

She looked at Sammy. He scratched vigorously for a moment, then sat motionless, eyes huge as moons in the dim light, staring at her. She thought of the poster: Fleas eating tapeworm eggs, dogs swallowing flea eggs, larvae infesting their tissues, tapeworms developing in the intestines, eggs excreted to be eaten by fleas, starting the cycle all over again. Dogs were the unwilling hosts in this progression of parasites.

If a particularly malignant parasite had invaded the colonists, the result might well be madness — a desire to wreck everything in sight — until death occurred.

But Sharnov didn't die — Somehow, he'd hung on to a shred of sanity long enough to plan his escape — *And he didn't need to eat* —

It didn't matter. She wasn't going to live long enough to tell anybody what had happened. She was dying.

Sammy whined softly at her. The surgical knife was cool under her fingers. Eat me, she'd hallucinated Sammy saying. Man's best friend giving his life willingly so that a human might live. She felt sick with misery.

She pushed herself slowly onto her knees, legs trembling under her, willing the muscles to work. She had to choose: starve to death before a starship picked up the signal and came to investigate, or do the unspeakable.

The dog watched her crawling toward him, neither fear nor curiosity in his gaze.

"I'm sorry — I have to do this — "

But as soon as the scalpel touched the dog's fur, she couldn't go on. She sat down on the floor, crying weakly, her arms around his shoulders. Sammy nuzzled her cheek.

You got a better idea? Dedrick had asked.

Maybe tomorrow.

Tomorrow she'd be too weak to lift the scalpel at all.

She rolled slowly onto her knees. "I love you," she said. "Forgive me."

He didn't bark or howl as she stabbed him, thrusting the scalpel deep between the ribs. He only let out a sigh as he slumped to the floor, as if something tortured had been set free.

* * *

It was hard to get the first mouthful of still warm flesh down, hard to ignore the iron stench of blood. But she managed it. Her jaw ached as she chewed, and her dry throat gagged as she swallowed. The meat was tough, stringy, strong-flavored. Her stomach reacted violently to the first swallow, rejecting it, but she persisted until something stayed down.

She concentrated on the idea that Sammy had wanted this, that it hadn't been a hallucination, that he'd somehow offered himself as a sacrifice so that she might live. In return, she ate reverently, as if she were taking communion.

She felt the alien presence in her stomach almost at once. Something live grew, hatched —

She went berserk with terror — kicking the remains of the dog's corpse — screaming till her throat hurt — banging her fists and her head against the wall till a hole appeared. This must've been the way the colonists felt, smashing their equipment in rage and horror. Making war on themselves. Slaughtering themselves rather than live with the consequences of what they'd done.

Sharnov — at least the part that was still sane — had tried to tell them that the starving colonists had eaten "rats." And so of course had the dog. The spider and flea analogies had been false. This was a symbiont that needed to co-exist with its host, not kill it, moving up the food chain as it was eaten and then taking over its host.

She'd been right about him the first time — the insane and the holy were both inhabited by an alien power. But humans had a terror of being possessed. The horror of her situation overwhelmed her again.

She had another thought. The dog had eaten the alien and not gone mad. She willed herself to stay calm and think this through.

One good thing emerged in the aftermath of eating: her strength was coming back. It didn't exhaust her any more just to think. She sat quietly, anguish and terror ebbing away in the face of the inevitable, the irremediable. What she'd done could not be undone, but she knew now she wasn't going to die unless it were by her own hand.

And if her suspicions about the way this alien somehow altered its host's body chemistry to use photosynthesis were correct, she wouldn't need to eat any more of Sammy's carcass. She wouldn't need to eat anything ever again.

Lingsters handled situations as bad as this in difficult interface. She'd been taught to face the unfiltered universe and survive. There just hadn't been a need to use that training until now. The resolve to survive calmed her. Fear ebbed slowly away.

She wasn't prepared for the alien's arrival in her mind.

Panic struck at the first tickle of utter otherness that slid through her thoughts.

Her Self tangled — smothered — she struggled to hold on — something crawled slowly through every cell of her body — undulating along the nerve pathways —

The alien was sentient. She wasn't prepared for this. She was going insane.

Never let emotion color the interface.

She dragged herself back from the brink of terror. She couldn't give up now. She had to be alive when the transponder's signal reeled in a passing starship. There must be a way to survive with the alien inside without losing herself. The dog's simpler consciousness had allowed him to host the alien without going mad.

The Guild had given her a life-raft. She would use it.

She began to recite the emergency protocols.

Step One: Let go of anger. Clear the mind so the alien couldn't mount its ambush from the undergrowth of her emotions. And in the clarity that emerged there'd be a solution, a way to co-exist, to survive.

Let go of anger. Let go of fear.

Pain lanced through her head — Chaos loomed — void —

Step Two: Let go of thought.

Something cold slithered — engulfing — something ripped — burst —

Rise above.

Let go of Self.

The ground opened — swallowed her — suffocating — roaring — she raised her arms — shot up into light.

Step Three: Hold the image.

The shockwave smacked into her. Neon colors raged out of her eyeballs — images for which there were no human correlation —

The tide went out. Chaos ebbed.

Hold fast the image.

Slowly, the tangled nightmare softened, pain fell away, the storm passed and calm returned. Her heartbeat slowed. She would endure. Every day she would wrestle this thing and endure. Human and alien.

Hybrid.

She thought of the hybrids she'd known in her childhood. They'd been strong, the best of both breeds.

She sat on the floor of the hut, staring out at the pink dawn sky shot with acid yellow rays of the rising sun. The alien was a survivor too. To wage war on the alien would kill them both, as the colonists had learned.

They would survive together now until a ship found its way here, no matter how long that took. Every day they'd have to compromise. She'd learn how to integrate the alien consciousness with the human till there was something new, better than each alone. Together, they would forge a communion of minds.

And then they'd go home to the Guild. ☙

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Walking the Labyrinth, by Lisa Goldstein, Tor Books, 1996, 256pp, $21.95, Hardcover

MOLLY Travers is a woman with a mysterious past — only she doesn't know it. Working as an office temp, she has moved from city to city, job to job, most recently settling in San Francisco, where she balances ennui against her needy, and it seems, one-sided relationship with Peter Myers, a writer of sleazy biographies. Then a private investigator named John Stow comes into her life, asking questions about Molly's great-aunt Fentrice and other members of the family, and nothing's quite the same anymore.

Molly knew that long before her own parents had died and her great-aunt took her in, Fentrice and the other members of the family had been vaudeville magicians. What she didn't know was that the family had its origins in a Victorian occult group who called themselves the Order of the Labyrinth and that some people believed the group really could work magic. They were all dead now, of course, or had vanished, except for Molly's aunt.

But as Molly begins to help John Stow in his investigations, traveling to England with him and then back again, she realizes that she has more living relatives than she'd initially thought. Not only had Fentrice lied to her throughout her life, but worse, her aunt was suspected by the other members of the family of having done away with her own sister.

Goldstein has done a remarkable job here, telling a multi-generational family history in far less wordage than most writers seem to require for such a work, but without skimping on a richness of mystery and detail. Her contemporary characters are wonderfully realized, as are, through various journal and diary extracts, the cast of Victori-

ans. Her take on magic, what it should be used for and how some would use it, is both whimsical and dangerous — which is how it should be. What I liked best, however, was how the lives of the Allalie family, and those who came under their influence, make a fascinating case study for how the past affects the present and that we can't entirely deal with the present until we've dealt with the past.

Though the antics of a group of vaudeville magicians and how Molly must deal with her lack of self-esteem might appear to lie on opposite ends of a spectrum at first, over the course of the book it makes perfect sense how she might be able to gain more self-confidence and put her life into some sort of order. But Goldstein lectures on none of these points. She simply tells a fine story — by turns charming, thoughtful and suspenseful — and allows her readers to make their own conclusions.

There's a recurring phrase in the book that one of the magicians asks at various times: "And what have you learned?" Readers might ask themselves the same question when they reach the end of *Walking the Labyrinth* and find that, like Molly, they, too, have an answer.

The November 1996 issue of

Science-Fiction Studies

will contain an annotated list of more than 350 courses on science fiction, utopian fiction, and fantasy at U.S. and Canadian colleges, together with articles on the teaching of these subjects on the college level by Jack Williamson, James Gunn, and other veteran teachers, as well as research articles and reviews of critical and scholarly books. Orders for this special issue must be received by September 15th. Send US$10.00 (CAN$14.00) to Science-Fiction Studies, East College, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN 46135-0037.

The Two Dead Girls, by Stephen King, Signet, 1996, 92pp, $2.99, Paperback

By the time you read this, the final installment of this six-part serial will have arrived at your local bookstore and those of us following it will know how it all turned out, but in the meantime I can't resist making a brief mention of the book here.

The Two Dead Girls exemplifies something I've always admired about King: unlike many writers, and certainly unlike most established writers, he always seems

willing to go the extra mile and take chances. Giving up a huge advance a few years ago with the stipulation that the money be used to give better advances to newer writers. The tour of independent book stores he made last year. The project in hand, a throwback to the last century that works just as well today.

Now I'll be the first to agree that not everything King writes is gold — *Gerald's Game* or *Needful Things* come immediately to mind as examples of how far he can go off track. But the important thing to remember with him is how often he gets it right. Without reading a word of his work, far too many people see, not even a movie but a *trailer* of a movie based on one of his books, and immediately dismiss everything he writes as though there's any real relationship between the two. Or worse, seem to feel that success in the marketplace immediately equates lesser quality work.

What they don't know, and too many people forget, is that this is the man who also gave us *The Stand*, "The Body," *Dolores Claiborne*, and any number of other wonderful, and yes, literate, books. This is a man who has so much money he doesn't need to ever write another word, but the stories burn away inside him so that he has to write. And I'm sure that if he was told that no publisher would ever buy a book of his again (as if), he'd still be sitting at his word processor, telling those stories.

The Two Dead Girls, the first installment of "The Green Mile" serial, has him working at top form. It's true that all it can do is set up what's to come, but from the first page I was drawn to the characters — the prison guards and the condemned men on death's row under their care — and the further I read, the more King brought to life these men, the prison setting, the hard times of the 1930s. As is often the case when I read his work, I think of King as one of those primal storytellers, the archetypal voice coming from across the fire that spins and weaves a tale, holding the darkness at bay with only his voice when the coals finally burn down.

I know many will scoff at this, but just as Dickens remains loved and read today, a hundred years in the future, King will be among the few writers working now who will still be read, not because his books are on some course of study, but because storytellers such as this always have an audience.

Synthesis & Other Virtual Realities, by Mary Rosenblum, Arkham House, 1996, 280pp, $21.95, Hardcover

Except to regular readers of newsstand sf magazines, Mary Rosenblum will probably not be a well-known name, for all that she has also had three novels published in the past few years. The readers can't be blamed. As more and more books get published each year, it becomes harder to keep up with it all. As the prices of books continue to rise, it becomes harder to afford to keep up with what we can. And the sad fact is that, when we do come across a writer we like, her earlier books are often out of print, the short stories pretty much gone forever.

Except occasionally a writer lucks out and one of the respected specialty press publishers will go out on a limb and publish a collection of her work and keep it in print for a little longer than the shelf-life of a paperback, as has happened here with Rosenblum. The stories were all previously published in *Asimov's* over the past five or six years, but don't let the fact that they're all reprints deter you. I read many of these in their original appearances and they stand up very well to rereading.

The stories all appear to share a similar background — a near-future view of our own world where the land has dried up, water is like gold, and the distance between the haves and the have-nots is pretty much insurmountable — but except for the last two stories, which share a character, each tells an individual tale. Rosenblum looks at all sides of society's spectrum, the extremely wealthy (as in the title story "Synthesis," where an artist must choose between his work and the family corporation), the working poor (as in the clash between two brothers in "Bordertown"), the disenfranchised ("The Centaur Garden," in which a musician's need to be his own man forces him to leave the safety of the city for the freedom and dangers that lie beyond) and those that attempt to bridge the uneven gap between the two (as with the medical aide in "Entrada" who endures the abuse of her employer so that she can use the old woman's computer to steal an education).

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These are all strong stories, set against a well-realized background with fascinating characters. The idea of choice, of confronting one's own demons and taking responsibility for one's own actions, plays a large role in most of them and what's interesting is how different Rosenblum can make this theme from story to story, character to character. But then that's the gift of a good writer, and it's also true to life, for no matter how much we might seem to share similar problems, in the end, the choices we have to face in our own lives are all individual as well.

If your local bookshop doesn't carry this, you can order if directly from Arkham House Publishers, Inc., Sauk City, WI 53583.

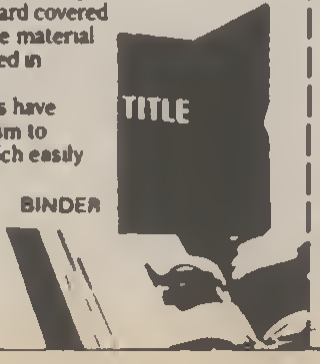
I have just enough room to briefly mention an item that has only a peripheral connection to our field. Cats appear to play a large role in the lives of many sf and fantasy readers — and if that doesn't include you, bear with me, because it still seems to hold true. So for those cat fanciers, I'd like to bring to your attention a gorgeous book I recently ran across: *The Mediterranean Cat*, a collection of photographs by Hans Silvester (Chronicle Books, 1996). Rather than the twee offering one might expect, in these photographs Silvester has combined a stunning locale, an artist's eye and a surprisingly wide range of mood for his portraits of feral cats living in extended families on a Greek island that he refuses to name.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

Men at Arms, by Terry Pratchett, HarperPrism, March 1996, $20.00, Hardcover

THE OTHER day I was speaking to a friend about this column, and he expressed both surprise and approval — until he asked me what (or who) I was reviewing. I gave him the titles of the books I'd chosen for the column you're now reading, or rather, I tried to. He stopped me after I'd pronounced most of the first person's last name and said, "What? You can't read *that* for your column — he's really good!"

I'm hardly likely to read and review someone I actively consider bad. "Well, yes."

"Then why are you reviewing him in a column called *Guilty Pleasures*?"

Which is my roundabout way of introducing *Men at Arms* by Terry Pratchett.

First things first: Pratchett uses English impeccably, with a lovely feel for nuance; he can create a mood — any mood — with a deftness that I, and I'm sure many others, would kill for. It's obvious he understands how to structure a story because the structure's there — sound, solid and seamless — and there's always a story around which he drapes his humor, his satire, his wit. That humor is unmatched in this genre — and in my very humble opinion matched by little else outside of it — and it is thankfully free of puns and the facile word plays that often seem to pass for humor in other less gifted writers. He's also proof to me that some justice exists in publishing, especially in Britain. And none of this has anything to do with why I'm reviewing him for this column.

I read Pratchett because he often makes me laugh, occasionally makes me cry, and always lets me come back to the world a happier person than I was when I started his

book. For whole days I can look at day-to-day things that normally make me pull my hair out in frustration and smile because they remind me of parts of Ankh-Morpork.

In *Men at Arms*, Pratchett returns to Carrot of the Night Watch, now a Corporal, still a very large, very tall man whom everyone happens to like, and who also happens to be somewhat simple (which is different from stupid; we have Detritus the Troll for that). His superior, Captain Vimes of the Night Watch, is about to marry the Richest Woman in Ankh-Morpork, which is going to force him into a much deserved retirement — at a time when the Night Watch itself has become a victim of the Patrician's new policies about hiring based on race, and it now has three new recruits: A Troll, a Dwarf, and a Woman.

Pratchett pokes fun at the idea of political correctness, and then, by resolving his story so gently, pokes fun at the idea of resenting it, all the while moving his story about murders — as opposed to Ankh-Morpork's loose definition of suicide — royalists and assassins at a good clip.

Humor is a difficult thing; it requires a certain amount of distance to work, both in life and in writing. Some authors seem to get that distance by scaling what they perceive to be a height and heaping scorn and contemptuous ridicule on those beneath them. Pratchett writes as if he's standing on the same ground as the rest of us, usually in the same front line. You can trust him.

And because you trust him, the moments in the book which turn suddenly, deeply serious are *felt* just as keenly, possibly more keenly, than they would be if the book was played straight; you turn around a literary corner, and there you are, with a truth that's cut to the heart of the matter so profoundly you'd be put out if he hadn't managed to make you genuinely care about his characters, their fates, and their beliefs, by caring about them himself.

Archangel, by Sharon Shinn, Ace, May 1996, $13.95.

Archangel is newcomer Sharon Shinn's second novel. I chose to read it because of the cover blurb, which is always a dangerous thing to do. But the blurb was by Peter Beagle, and he compared this author to Robin McKinley. So I came to the book with certain Expectations.

I am inclined to be suspicious of novels that contain a listing of the cast of characters. This does. I also approached the first chapter of

this book thinking "McKinley," and it's not. And last, there's an awful lot on the Angels market these days. Having painted a picture of perhaps a not entirely open-minded reader, I can then go on to say that I found the *Archangel* completely captivating. There is no question about the existence of Angels; Shinn has set her story on a far-off world, but although there are hints that this is science fiction, the world-building remains in the background, the characters in the foreground. And the characters — Gabriel, the Angel in line for the title of Archangel, and Rachel, the reluctant human woman whose been chosen by the Oracle (a computer system of some sort) as his bride — are everything.

The reluctant bride and the arrogant groom are, of course, familiar. But this groom is an Angel, an angel with deeper convictions than most, and this bride is a human whose life has been almost destroyed by the inaction, and action, of Angels. Theirs is at best an uneasy romance set against a larger backdrop.

Because while Gabriel might be in line for the "throne," the current Archangel, Raphael, doesn't really seem to have a strong desire to retire at the end of his fixed term.

By the end of this book, *I* wanted as desperately as the Angels did to believe in their God and his justice; in fact, I wanted it just a bit more than I wanted Rachel and Gabriel to bridge the wide gap between them. And you know something? If Shinn's prose is nothing like McKinley's, there is something about the heart of her story and its uncluttered clarity, that *is* very reminiscent of McKinley's work. This is exactly the type of book I would have loved when I was younger — and it's a lot harder now to reach that part of me than it was then, but when it is reached, I appreciate it a whole lot more.

City of Diamond, by Jane Emerson, DAW, March 1996, $5.99.

At over six hundred pages, this is a brick of a book. It is also, at over six hundred pages, very easy to read; you never feel its length, and in fact, if Emerson had chosen to go on for another couple of hundred pages, I wouldn't have minded at all. Adrian Mercati is thrown into the role of Protector of the City of Diamond, one of the Three Cities — vast interstellar spaceships with whole religious cultures based on a murky past and an alien intervention. Not that he doesn't want the job, and not that he's not the man for it, but at twenty, he's a tad on the young side. He immediately makes arrangements for a political

marriage to Iolanthe of the City of Opal, a seventeen-year-old who makes him seem worldly and wise. This marriage is viewed in a much better light than other choices he's made — in particular, his choice of a personal guard. Tal Diamond is an Aphean, a Human-Elaphite crossbreed. Commonly called demons on the Cities, and illegal everywhere but the Empire, Apheans are apparently *always* sociopaths, and none of them has ever survived to the age of forty, with most dying a lot earlier than that. Tal in turn has chosen two very unlikely servants: Spider, a man who lives on the fringes of legality (well, okay, off the fringes, but he's an unaccountably likable character, so I want to be nice) and Keylinn Gray, one of the legendary Graykey — a group of people who are apparently dedicated to the service of others, and who will do everything, including die, to live up to their contract.

Add to this mix the hunt for a legendary artifact (the Sawyer Crown, named after Adrian Sawyer, who is considered the founding father of the Three Cities, and a rather bitter rivalry with the City of Opal), and you've got *City of Diamond*.

This is a terrific winter book, and would also probably be a terrific beach book. It's complex enough to hold the interest, and accessible enough to read after a long hard day. The characters are people you'd like as friends, and there's something about the whole novel that feels like the good parts of Jane Austen, although I couldn't say why.

Only complaint: It's the first of more than one. And it's only a complaint because I want number two *now*.

Scholar of Decay, by Tanya Huff, TSR, December 1995, $5.99

Scholar of Decay is one of the TSR Ravenloft novels. In other words, a gaming tie-in. There's no way to argue that fact. It is *also* a Tanya Huff novel, and once you read it you can't argue that fact either. Huff fans take note.

Aurek Nuiken is a tormented man who is trying desperately to save himself from the one act that is a hair's breadth from destroying his life. He has power, because in the AD&D universe, a scholar is often a tinkering mage. He has responsibilities in the form of his younger, insecure brother Dmitri. And he has a problem in the form of twin sisters who seem to be at the heart of the power of Richemulot, the city that contains enough ancient mysteries that he has hopes of finding his salvation there.

Aurek is a wonderful character, and Louise and Jacqueline are siblings with a sense of rivalry that makes dysfunctional seem like a happy word. When these three meet, things get more complicated than a mere mage can deal with.

It's obvious that Huff had fun writing this; the black sense of humor that often glimmers in her previous books is at front and center here. But because this is set in the Ravenloft world, this is probably the darkest of all of the novels she's written. No, scratch that. It *is* the darkest. If you like her work, you'll definitely like this book, but if you want a comfortably happy ending, I'd suggest you look elsewhere.

Book of Moons, by Rosemary Edghill, Tor, November 1995, $20.95, Hardcover (mass market November 1996)

Bast is a modern pagan, living in the sometimes bewildering landscape of an entirely mundane urban New York. She is a witch. She believes in the Goddess, and the power of the Goddess. She also believes in fast Chinese food, working for a living, and keeping an open mind.

Bast is a wonderful character, and the first person narrative drives the book, dragging you along from the first sentence to the last. She is completely believable; there are no false notes at all. Her world is very real, because she is, and if it's tainted with a certain pragmatism, even cynicism, well, that's New York. She's also considered a pillar of the Wiccan community, and when people are having difficulty, she's the sort of person they call. As a friend. Or as a person who can be trusted to have and follow scruples.

Every witch has a Book of Shadows, and having them stolen is like having a diary stolen, but possibly worse. It's also becoming a common problem, one which eventually leads to a murder or two, which is not uncommon enough in New York.

And that's the problem with the novel. As a *mystery* it fails because the murderer and the motive are obvious from the moment s/he appears on screen. If it's obvious to me, it's obvious: I'm always misled. I never get it until the end. But as a novel, it's a delight *because* Bast is so compelling.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Firestar, by Michael F. Flynn, Tor, 1996, 575pp, $27.95, Hardcover

IF YOU WERE one of the richest people in America, what would you do? Travel the world? Build a palace? Throw big parties and hobnob with celebrities? If you were Mariesa van Huyten, Flynn's main character in his latest novel and heiress to a fortune, you'd start an educational program designed to motivate apathetic students toward a more hopeful future. They in turn would become enthusiastic workers to support your clandestine space program. A program that means something different to everyone involved, and only those closest to Mariesa know what it means to her.

Flynn takes the reader on a ride through the classroom, the boardroom, and development of new space travel technology. He deftly adds politicians, consumer advocates, environmental watchdogs and throws in a little romance and sabotage for good measure. *Firestar*, a complete novel in itself, sets the stage for an exciting new future history that brings back the sense of wonder and hope that's been lacking in so much recent science fiction.

Aliens and Alien Societies, by Stanley Schmidt, Writer's Digest Books, March 1996, 226pp, $17.99, Hardcover

World-Building, by Stephen L. Gillett, Writer's Digest Books, March 1996, 198pp, $16.99, Hardcover

These are the first two books in Writer's Digest's Science Fiction Writing Series edited by Ben Bova, and they make an impressive beginning. Both are filled with excellent advice and interesting new ideas for the writer, whether novice or old hand, who is interested in creating believable science fiction or fantasy stories.

Schmidt explains not only how to design a realistic alien, but how to extrapolate the nature of the beast from the nature of the environment

— or vice versa. Chapters on alien biochemistry, sociology, language, motivations, and much more show why aliens won't be just funny-looking people, and sections on space travel and interaction with humans shed light on some of the ways we might reach and/or communicate with them. Schmidt explains not only how known science can be used to lend credibility to your creations, but how to use the gaps in our present knowledge to allow for some wild speculation as well. Using many examples from published fiction, Schmidt shows what works and why, and what choices the author had to make to ensure believability.

Gillett focuses on the physical requirements for supporting life, both alien and human. He discusses stellar evolution, planetary formation, and how life interacts with a planet over geological time to affect the environment. This book provides the equations necessary for determining your planet's orbit around its sun, the tidal effects, atmospheric composition and density, and many other factors that affect its ability to support life; and it explains in clear language how to calculate these parameters for yourself. Gillett also discusses the consequences of changing various parameters like surface gravity, solar radiation, or elemental composition. In the process he shows why some classic sf clichés don't work, and speculates on some very exotic possibilities that might.

Both books are heavily referenced and well-indexed, and would make valuable additions to any science fiction or fantasy writer's library.

Pirates of the Universe, by Terry Bisson, Tor, 320pp, April 1996, $22.95,.Hardcover

Gunther Ryder is a Space Ranger hunting Peteys, and all he wants to do is make enough to retire to a theme park called "Pirates of the Universe" in Orlando. The world is oil-depleted, and a corporation called Disney-Windows mostly runs the show. The Peteys always appear in groups of three near the moon. They might be ships; they might be creatures; they might be bubbles into elsewhere. Or maybe all of those or something else entirely. We don't know. What humankind is after is the "skin" of the Peteys, which is the stuff of the new economy. But even that is changing.

The plot is intricate and carefully constructed and is better experienced than described. Gun loses his braid which means he's in

trouble for reasons he doesn't understand, he has a package to deliver, all the various powers (Disney-Windows, the Sierras, Friends, and Fundamentals) seem to be playing him off each other.

Gun's backwoods family is wonderfully described — a brother on the lam, another brother who drives a riverboat, a father and an uncle who carefully milk small amounts of oil from a lot of old cars. He has a hometown girlfriend, and he hopes she'll go with him to "Pirates of the Universe" when he finally makes it. Meanwhile he likes to spend his off hours in a virtual reality parlor called the Dogg in Orlando (the corporate bureaucracy lives in "the Girl"). Gun goes into the VR world of the Dogg to see Tiffany whom he can never remember much about when he's not in the Dogg because she's copy-protected.

The science is fun. "Since the Tangle was at least partially extradimensional, flickering in and out of ordinary space, it was impossible to photograph." There is a literary device involving *National Geographic* citations that will knock you out. Bisson's twist on VR will make you smile. The characters are memorable. The book is a wild ride. Highly recommended.

Whiteout, by Sage Walker, Tor, April 1996, 352pp, $23.95, Hardcover

This elegantly written thriller sweeps the reader into a near-future world where skin is a medium of communication, privacy is a thing of the past, personhood is global, virtual reality and real-time are inextricably mixed, and Earth's oceans are dying.

Four people make up the gestalt that is Edges, an entity that can analyze and shift opinions. What should have been a straightforward mission to influence world opinion turns into a fast-paced mystery, and each deftly delineated character in this intricate story responds in a different and fascinating way.

Whiteout is a brilliant debut novel, with a scope that encompasses Antarctica, Lisbon, Taos, and the human heart. Walker's consummate skill plunges the reader into this strange new world with hardly a ripple, and it is a fortunate fall.

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James Patrick Kelly's most recent appearance in F&SF *was in last year's October/November issue, a story he wrote in collaboration with Jonathan Lethem and John Kessel. Tor published his book,* Wildlife, *in July of 1995. And he currently has a short story on the final Hugo ballot.*

Jim writes, "'Why The Bridge Stopped Singing' is one of those exceedingly rare stories that came to me in a dream. I remember sitting here in my office at 3 something in the AM, groggily scribbling as much as I could remember of it on the back of an old manuscript I'd fished out of the trash. Of course, the finished story is much changed from those almost indecipherable notes, but several of the images here come to you direct from my unconscious."

Why the Bridge Stopped Singing

By James Patrick Kelly

"NO, JOE JOEY-OE MAKES SIX. Six dead since summer."

"Maybe they'll take us at the Gibson Street shelter."

"Deader than dead, Joey. Broke his promise too."

"I need a drink a hell of a lot more than a bed."

"Me, I need food. Stomach is tight as a fist."

"Someone stoke the fire. It's fuckin' cold.."

"This ain't cold, Joe. *Christmas* is cold."

"You want to check out the Colonel?"

"Dumpster biscuits. Side of slaw."

"Valentine's Day, Joey-oey."

"What about it?"

"*That's* cold."

"Yeah."

I stand next to them, listening silently. As long as I don't say anything, they can't see me. If I speak, there I am. But their conversation gutters like the fire and goes out and the quiet gets all creepycrawly so I stagger off into the darkness down the concrete embankment to the river to take a leak. The bridge sings to me as a truck passes over, *stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni.* My piss slaps heavily into the freezing water. I wave my dick at the EPA, zip, and turn left toward a sky full of mean stars. They get brighter in winter, bigger. Cold makes the air like a lens. At ten below stars can burn through a man's eyes right into his brain — happened to me once. Downstream, there's a giant's comb washed up on the embankment. I slink over to it, trying to convince myself that it's only a ladder with the side rail missing, that his footprints are just big smears of mud. If I don't believe in him, see, he doesn't exist. The wood is mostly dry so I decide to be a citizen and drag it up to the fire.

"You broke your promise, Joey-oey-oey-oe." He swallows the dead man's name, turning it into a yodel. "*No Joey-noey-oey-oey-oe.*" He has the voice for it, but no rhythm. Crazy as a chicken and chatting with his hallucinations. It's a luxury I can't afford because of the curse. *My* hallucinations can come true if I'm not careful. I break some teeth off the comb and toss them into the fire barrel.

"*No Joey-oey-noey-oey-oey-oey-no.*"

"Hey Gene Autry, shut the fuck up."

As flames lick out of the barrel, I eyeball them. Gene Autry is wrapped in a tarp beneath one of those easy-load shopping carts where the basket rides high and shallow. Two guys are lying together in a cardboard box with a picture of a computer desk on it. They've stuffed it with newspapers for warmth. Tape the ends, stick a $200 stamp on the box and we could mail them to Florida. Or North Dakota. A black guy is stretched out in the shadows that flutter like crows against the bridge abutment. Asleep or passed out, but not dead. He hasn't shrunk like dead men do.

"Gene Autry?" says one of the box guys. "Is that what you called him? How old are you anyway?"

"Old enough to be fuckin' president."

"Joey-noey-oey-oey-no."

"Listen, I gotta eat."

"So eat." The box shudders.

"Besides, you ain't got shit to drink."

"No."

If that's true, I can't stay with them. If I don't pour some alcohol on my imagination soon, the river could thicken to blood. Frogs might crawl up my pants.

"But Mags'll have a bottle. Always does."

"Always does," says Gene Autry, "even though Joey's dead and some other Joe is next. Like this one, no?" He points at me, even though I still haven't said anything. Maybe he thinks I'm one of his hallucinations. "JoJo, son of Joey-oe, Nojo." He's staring X rays through me.

"This Mags," I say, speaking for the first time. "He'll be here when?" I snap the comb's spine with my foot.

One box guy says, "Mags ain't a fuckin' bus."

"She tries to help."

"Sorta like the fairy godmother, Nojo," says Gene Autry.

"More like Santa."

"Ain't many left like old Mags."

I stir the bones of the fire, feel its smoky breath on my face.

"Where you from, Nojo?" says Gene Autry.

"That's not my name." I left my name under the plastic chair in that hospital waiting room a long time ago. I can be anyone now, see. Bob Hope, Madame Curie, Baby Jesus, Lassie, anything I can imagine. That's the curse. But I should never have opened my mouth. They're asking me questions, next they'll be taking my pulse.

"You got to be from someplace."

"Everybody is."

I keep my voice locked up. Its wings tickle my throat.

"Someplace secret maybe?"

"Like Fort Knox?"

"The North Pole?"

"No-no-no Joe. Oz."

A car passes over and the bridge sings to me again, *sun so hot I froze to death*. But *death* hits an odd, clangy note, like a cell door slamming.

Like a warning. I glance up at the bridge. When I look back, there they are, standing on the other side of the fire.

The man is wearing a long, open military coat over eighteen sweaters. A ski mask covers his face. He is carrying a nylon bag with NASA printed on it. He tucks it under his arm and it clinks. She's taller, with wide, square shoulders. She has on that tatty mink coat my mother gave to the Salvation Army in 1969. It makes her look like a fur refrigerator. Her hair is dirty and gray and flattened against her head. She's wearing lipstick. "Evening, boys." We can see her breath when she speaks. "Nice weather for penguins." She nods at me. "New member of the tribe?"

"Nojo," says Gene Autry. "Nojo of Oz."

She smiles at me. "You know, they'll give you a free coat over on Gibson Street." The lipstick has reddened her teeth.

"New here," I say. "Not sure where all the buttons are yet."

"He thought you were a man, Mags."

"Coat might save your life," she says.

"I've got the fire," I say. "I'm okay."

"Nojo's okay, Joey's dead. Broke his promise."

"Mags, I'm glad to see you and everything, but I gotta ask. You got anything to drink?"

"Joey-noey-oe was the sixth. Some got sick, couple froze, one got run over. Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, all dead."

"Sell my left nut for a taste."

"You thirsty?" She watches me. My face disappears and I feel her read the nerves scribbling in my head. "Takes the chill off."

I nod.

"Ángel, some spirits for our new friend."

Ángel is nobody's friend. He glares angrily, then squats to zip the NASA bag. The two box guys unpack themselves. Gene Autry walks his shopping cart forward without getting out from underneath the basket. The black guy sits, tries to stand and falls over on his side. He is thin as a knife. Ángel hefts an unopened fifth of Conquistador whiskey into the firelight. He twists the cap; the seal cracks with a sound like a cockroach popping. He drinks with his eyes fixed on me: two, three big swallows. He lowers the bottle, his lips gleaming. "¡Me cago en la leche de tu puta madre!"

The black guy coughs like an old Chevy and makes it up on the third try.

"What'd he say?"

"He shits in the milk of my whore mother." Mags extends her hand for the bottle.

"¡Coño!"

She wiggles her fingers. When he gives it to her, she passes it immediately to the black guy. His Adam's apple bobs spasmodically, as if he's trying to remember how to swallow. His hands shake as he tips his head back and kisses the bottle on the mouth. All it takes is one swallow and he's steady as a gravestone. We watch as the whiskey makes its way slowly around the fire. When it's my turn, I cradle the bottle for a moment. It is a Preferred Blend and has A Tradition of Excellence Since 1931. The Conquistador is on horseback; he's wearing armor the color of an old spoon. He has ridden a long way, over mountains and deserts and bar codes, in his quest for strong drink. I lift his bottled gold.

The whiskey vaporizes in my mouth and whistles down my throat like steam. It changes as it settles in my gut, becomes a kind of glow, only it carries a weight and the bitter fragrance of newly split oak. The fragrance curls into my blood, streams to my head. Then my vision blurs and for one short, infinitely sweet moment, things stop being *like* other things. They simply are. The bridge becomes the bridge, my shoe is itself only. I can no longer hear the world whisper of secret and insidious connections. Leaves cease to conspire with branches. The ground does not rise up to meet me. I am that dull and happy stranger who has nothing special about him.

"Hey, Nojo."

"Next!"

"Wake up, damn it."

I feel someone grab at my sleeve and drag me back to the crackle and snap of words. Time for the Conquistador to ride on and topple new imaginations.

The bottle circles the fire three times before Mags stops it. By then the black guy is sitting, muttering, with his head between his legs. One of the box guys is shivering so hard it makes my bones rattle. I can still feel the cold creep through my shirt and pinch my nipples. But now I wear the

armor of a conquistador and don't care. I am stronger than weather; if I want I can melt a hole to the center of the earth. Mags holds the bottle by its neck and waves it over the fire. Half an inch of whiskey splashes and skins down the sides.

"Once m-more, Mags." The box guy's teeth click like hail on a dumpster.

"Don't be so damn greedy." She shakes the bottle at him.

"I'm f-f-fuckin' freezing. Jesus, do I have to b-beg?"

"You could," she says. "Joe did. Not that it mattered."

"Oh, no, Joe-oey wouldn't beg." Gene Autry shakes his head. "Not Joey-oe."

"Things change at the end," she says. "I know, I was there."

"Oh no. No-no-no." Gene Autry lurches from under his shopping cart, sneezes and begins sorting through the treasures in the basket. "Oh no, you weren't."

"Heard he died of fever."

"Uh-uh. He fuckin' froze."

"He promised me," says Gene Autry. A ball of twine flips out of the basket and ravels down the embankment toward the river. "Nope. No!"

"I found him on a bench by the pond in Fisher Park," she says. "He'd pissed and puked himself. When I woke him up, he asked for help. I took him home."

"Se la tiró."

"He never touched me, barely knew where he was. I took off his clothes and gave him a hot bath. I put him in my own bed. I sang to him."

"No way, no such bathtub." Gene Autry points a shoe at Mags. "And where'd you get a bed anyway?"

"Where I got this whiskey, eh Ángel?"

Ángel scratches his nose through the ski mask. "Eso es como cagadas de hormiga."

"This is not ant shit." She waggles the bottle at him. "It's important. Six people are dead because they had no place to go. These men are suffering."

He shrugs and picks up the NASA bag.

"Poor Ángel doesn't understand what we're doing here. He'd rather be

home on the couch scratching his balls and watching *It's A Wonderful Life*. Me, I try to help."

"No," says Gene Autry. "Nope. They found Joey behind the middle school. It was in the paper. No-no-no, absolutely not."

"I had to stick him someplace after it was over. He didn't care."

"But he — okay." Gene Autry finally finds what he's looking for. "Okay, the no-good bastard was my only friend." He shakes a white telephone handset loose from the pile and speaks into it. "You promised me, Joey-oe. No, you did. You said you'd found it and you said you'd show me the way back and you promised, Jojoey."

"Back where?" says Mags.

He waves for her to be quiet; he's listening. "No, Joe." He listens some more. "No, but Joe..." He cups a hand over the speaker. "Back to the world. He promised to show me how."

The box guys glance at each other in alarm. One takes the other by the hand and they scuttle back to their box. I don't bother to hide. I've been quiet so long, I'm invisible again.

"Give me that." Mags transfers the whiskey bottle to her left hand and reaches for the handset with her right.

"Just a minute, Joey-oe. She wants to speak to you."

She holds it a couple of inches away from her ear. "What?" She shakes her head. "You're dead, Joe. Hang up." She tosses it back to Gene Autry.

His eyes are like wounds. "*Joe!*" He listens, jiggles the handset, tries again. "Joe." His voice is as small as a teardrop. It is suddenly so quiet that we can hear the black guy grumbling in his sleep. Even the fire is holding its breath. For a moment Gene Autry stares at the holes in the mouthpiece; as if trying somehow to connect the pattern of dots into the dead man's face. His mouth opens, closes.

"Shi...." The black guy's leg jerks and he keels onto his side. "Nmmm." His face is the color of my father's belt.

"You want to go back to the world? There's only one way. Climb up to the highway and head south into town." Mags grasps Gene Autry's shoulders and aims him upriver. "When you come to Summer, take a left. Go through three lights and bear left again onto Gibson. The shelter is number twenty-four."

"Nomm," the black guy mutters. "No room."

He's right. I've never been able to fit my damned imagination inside any of the shelters or clinics or hospitals. Even now, diminished by the Conquistador, it's still too swollen to be contained by any building.

Gene Autry shakes out of Mags's grip, stumbles to the barrel and drops the phone into the fire.

"He begged for what?" The question sneaks out of the side of my mouth. I'm astonished; I didn't mean to reveal myself.

Gene Autry drags his shopping cart away from us.

"You said he begged." It's the Conquistador, see, hijacking my voice. "What for?"

"Whiskey," she says. "Booze, the demon, the eighty proof miracle." She grins. "Actually, I believe he called it laughing soup."

"Joey would've said that." Gene Autry folds himself back under his basket. "Said it all the time, yeah, gimme a cup of the laughing soup. What Joe said. Only he's dead."

"That what you need, Nojo?" Mags jiggles the bottle; the whiskey sparkles. "Make a new man of you."

"Sure," says the Conquistador. He's frightening me; I've never been two people at the same time before.

"Don't bother," says Gene Autry. "Nothing lasts."

"I bet it's hard being you," she says. "Busy twisting the world into a poem. Hard to be so different." I can feel Mags rummaging around inside our head.

"Fuck, yes," says the Conquistador.

"Nmmm. Uhh, go home."

"But get a load on and *boom* — you're just like everyone else."

"Boom." The Conquistador laughs.

"Nojo disappears," says Mags.

The Conquistador laughs again and waves our hand. "Bye."

"No-no-no." Gene Autry gathers the tarp tightly around him. "Don't you understand? Joe's dead. Nothing lasts."

"Oh, this can," she says. "It's a preferred blend, a special laughing soup just guaranteed to make you the same as everyone. Or maybe you'd rather freeze with these crazies, die like poor Joe? I can help, but only if you let me." She holds out the bottle. "Okay? All you have to do is give us a kiss. Just like in the fairy tale."

She is going to put out my imagination. I can run away, except that I have the courage of a conquistador.

"The same as everyone."

As she comes nearer, the whiskey starts to boil.

"Bye, Nojo."

The bottle warps and sags around her hand, like plastic in a fire.

"Kiss."

She catches me by the wrist. The dead mink smells like the back of my mother's closet. I can still escape if I want but I am brave and hold my ground. *The same.* She lifts the ruined bottle, tilts the rest of the whiskey into her mouth and holds it there. *As everyone.* Her face grows huge and scary as the moon but I don't flinch. *A job, TV, and a bed with green sheets.* When she kisses me, my lips part.

The whiskey floods from her into me, scalding my tongue and throat, thawing memories that had been frozen for years. I start to laugh and choke at the same time. There I was, sitting on the shoes in the back of my parents' closet and I was wearing my dad's motorcycle helmet and I had tied a towel cape around my neck and mommy was calling, "Petey, where are you? Peter!" and I tried not to giggle but I was only a little kid and she heard me and opened the door and she said, "Petey, I've been looking all over, how long have you been sitting in the dark?" and I said, "This is outer space and I'm an astronaut and it has to be dark because it's always nighttime in space...," but before I could finish she caught me up in her arms and hugged me and said, "What am I going to do with you?" and when I wriggled, my space helmet fell over my eyes and she laughed, "You're just as bad as me, you know. You let your imagination run away with you," and she kept laughing at me, so I told her I was *not* bad and mommy said, "No, it's what makes you special, a kind of magic. Because if you have an imagination, you can do anything, be anything when you grow up."

Anything.

But it wasn't her fault. See, she didn't realize it was a curse.

I woke the next morning. The fire was out. The box was empty. I was alone. Up under the shelter of the abutment was a bundle of old clothes. There was broken glass everywhere. I had a headache. The dim sunlight made it worse.

I climbed through the weeds to the top of the bridge. There were lots of cars now. People were going to work. I stuck my thumb out to hitch a ride. A car went by, heading south into town. It didn't stop. Another. I had to laugh. I didn't blame them, the way that I looked. A truck was coming from the opposite direction. I listened as it passed. The bridge didn't sing.

I was done with imagination. But I had a name. It was Pete.



"Ed, the Feds are on to you. Get yourself to another island."

Ever since John Crowley published his first sf novel in 1975, he has had a significant impact on the field. His works, from Little, Big *to* Ægypt *have generated discussion and controversy. His short stories are always an event.*

"Gone" is no different. It's a stunning near-future sf tale, and the inspiration for Bryn Barnard's cover.

Gone

By John Crowley

ELMERS AGAIN.*

You waited in a sort of exasperated amusement for yours, thinking that if you had been missed last time yours would likely be among the households selected this time, though how that process of selection went on no one knew, you only knew that a new capsule had been detected entering the atmosphere (caught by one of the thousand spy satellites and listening-and-peering devices that had been trained on the big Mother Ship in orbit around the moon for the past year) and though the capsule had apparently burned up in the atmosphere, that's just what had happened the time before, and then elmers everywhere. You could hope that you'd be skipped or passed over — there were people who had been skipped last time when all around them neighbors and friends had been visited or afflicted, and who would appear now and then and be interviewed on the news, though having nothing, after all, to say, it was the rest of us who had the stories — but in any case you started looking out the windows, down the drive, listening for the doorbell to ring in the middle of the day.

Pat Poynton didn't need to look out the window of the kid's bedroom where she was changing the beds, the only window from which the front door could be seen, when her doorbell rang in the middle of the day. She could almost hear, subliminally, every second doorbell on Ponader Drive, every second doorbell in South Bend go off just at that moment. She thought: Here's mine.

They had come to be called elmers (or Elmers) all over this country at least after David Brinkley had told a story on a talk-show about how when they built the great World's Fair in New York in 1939, it was thought that people out in the country, people in places like Dubuque and Rapid City and South Bend, wouldn't think of making a trip East and paying five dollars to see all the wonders, that maybe the great show wasn't for the likes of them; and so the fair's promoters hired a bunch of people, ordinary-looking men with ordinary clothes wearing ordinary glasses and bow-ties, to fan out to places like Vincennes and Austin and Brattleboro and just talk it up. Pretend to be ordinary folks who had been to the fair, and hadn't been high-hatted, no sirree, had a wonderful time, the wife too, and b'gosh had Seen the Future and could tell you the sight was worth the five dollars they were asking, which wasn't so much since it included tickets to all the shows and lunch. And all these men, whatever their real names were, were all called Elmer by the promoters who sent them out.

Pat wondered what would happen if she just didn't open the door. Would it eventually go away? It surely wouldn't push its way in, mild and blobby as it was (from the upstairs window she could see that it was the same as the last ones) and that made her wonder how after all they had all got inside — as far as she knew there weren't many who had failed to get at least a hearing. Some chemical hypnotic maybe that they projected, calming fear. What Pat felt standing at the top of the stair and listening to the doorbell pressed again (timidly, she thought, tentatively, hopefully) was amused exasperation, just like everyone else's: a sort of oh-Christ-no with a burble of wonderment just below it, and even expectation: for who wouldn't be at least intrigued by the prospect of his, or her, own lawn-mower, snow-shoveler, hewer of wood and drawer of water, for as long as it lasted?

"Mow your lawn?" it said when Pat opened the door. "Take out trash? Mrs. Poynton?"

Now actually in its presence, looking at it through the screen door, Pat felt most strongly a new part of the elmer feeling: a giddy revulsion she had not expected. It was so not human. It seemed to have been constructed to resemble a human being by other sorts of beings who were not human and did not understand very well what would count as human with other humans. When it spoke its mouth moved *(mouth-hole must move when speech is produced)* but the sound seemed to come from somewhere else, or from nowhere.

"Wash your dishes? Mrs. Poynton?"

"No," she said, as citizens had been instructed to say. "Please go away. Thank you very much."

Of course the elmer didn't go away, only stood bobbing slightly on the doorstep like a foolish child whose White Rose salve or Girl Scout cookies haven't been bought.

"Thank you very much," it said, in tones like her own. "Chop wood? Draw water?"

"Well gee," Pat said, and, helplessly, smiled.

What everyone knew, besides the right response to give to the elmer, which everyone gave and almost no one was able to stick to, was that these weren't the creatures or beings from the Mother Ship itself up above (so big you could see it, pinhead sized, crossing the face of the affronted moon) but some kind of creation of theirs, sent down in advance. An artifact, the official word was; some sort of protein, it was guessed; some sort of chemical process at the heart of it or head of it, maybe a DNA-based computer or something equally outlandish, but no one knew because of the way the first wave of them, flawed maybe, fell apart so quickly, sinking and melting like the snowmen they sort of resembled after a week or two of mowing lawns and washing dishes and pestering people with their Good Will Ticket, shriveling into a sort of dry flocked matter and then into nearly nothing at all, like cotton candy in the mouth.

"Good Will Ticket?" said the elmer at Pat Poynton's door, holding out to her a tablet of something not paper, on which was written or printed or anyway somehow indited a little message. Pat didn't read it, didn't need to, you had the message memorized by the time you opened your door to a second-wave elmer like Pat's. Sometimes lying in bed in the morning in the bad hour before the kids had to be got up for school Pat would repeat

like a prayer the little message that everybody in the world it seemed was going to be presented with sooner or later:

GOOD WILL
YOU MARK BELOW
ALL ALL RIGHT WITH LOVE AFTERWARDS
WHY NOT SAY YES
YES

And no space for No, which meant — if it was a sort of vote (and experts and officials, though how such a thing could have been determined Pat didn't know, were guessing that's what it was) a vote to allow or to accept the arrival or descent of the Mother Ship and its unimaginable occupants or passengers — that you could only refuse to take it from the Elmer: shaking your head firmly and saying No clearly but politely, because even *taking* a Good Will Ticket might be the equivalent of a Yes, and though what it would be a Yes *to* exactly no one knew, there was at least a ground swell of opinion in the think-tanks that it meant acceding to or at least not resisting World Domination.

You weren't, however, supposed to shoot your elmer. In places like Idaho and Siberia that's what they were doing, you heard, though a bullet or two didn't seem to make any difference to them, they went on pierced with holes like characters in the Dick Tracy comics of long ago, smiling shyly in at your windows, rake your leaves? Yard work? Pat Poynton was sure that Lloyd would not hesitate to shoot, would be pretty glad that at last something living or at least moving and a certified threat to freedom had at last got before him to be aimed at. In the hall-table drawer Pat still had Lloyd's 9mm Glock pistol, he had let her know he wanted to come get it but he wasn't getting back into this house, she'd use it on him herself if he got close enough.

Not really, no, she wouldn't. And yet.

"Wash windows?" the elmer now said.

"Windows," Pat said, feeling a little of the foolish self-consciousness people feel who are inveigled by comedians or MCs into having conversations with puppets, wary in the same way too, the joke very likely being on her. "You do windows?"

It only bobbed before her like a big water toy.

"Okay," she said, and her heart filled. "Okay come on in."

Amazing how graceful it really was; it seemed to navigate through the house and the furniture as though it were negatively charged to them, the way it drew close to the stove or the refrigerator and then was repelled gently away, avoiding collision. It seemed to be able to compact or compress itself too, make itself smaller in small spaces, grow again to full size in larger spaces.

Pat sat down on the couch in the family room, and watched. It just wasn't possible to do anything else but watch. Watch it take the handle of a bucket; watch it open the tops of bottles of cleansers, and seem to inhale their odors to identify them; take up the squeegee and cloth she found for it. The world, the universe, Pat thought (it was the thought almost everyone thought who was just then taking a slow seat on his or her davenport in his or her family room or in his or her vegetable garden or junkyard or wherever and watching a second-wave elmer get its bearings and get down to work): how big the world, the universe is, how strange; how lucky I am to have learned it, to be here now seeing this.

So the world's work, its odd jobs anyway, were getting done as the humans who usually did them sat and watched, all sharing the same feelings of gratitude and glee, and not only because of the chores being done: it was that wonder, that awe, a universal neap-tide of common feeling such as had never been experienced before, not by this species, not anyway since the days on the old old veldt when every member of it could share the same joke, the same dawn, the same amazement. Pat Poynton, watching hers, didn't hear the beebeep of the school-bus horn.

Most days she started watching the wall-clock and her wristwatch alternately a good half-hour before the bus's horn could be expected to be heard, like an anxious sleeper who continually awakes to check his alarm clock to see how close it has come to going off. Her arrangement with the driver was that he wouldn't let her kids off before tooting. He promised. She hadn't explained why.

But today the sounding of the horn had sunk away deeply into her backbrain, maybe three minutes gone, when Pat at last re-heard it or remembered having heard and not noticed it. She leapt to her feet, an awful certainty seizing her; she was out the door as fast as her heartbeat

accelerated, and was coming down the front steps just in time to see down at the end of the block the kids disappearing into and slamming the door of Lloyd's classic Camaro (whose macho rumble Pat now realized she had also been hearing for some minutes.) The cherry-red muscle car, Lloyd's other and more beloved wife, blew exhaust from double pipes that stirred the gutter's leaves, and leapt forward as though kicked.

She shrieked, and spun around, seeking help; there was no one in the street. Two steps at a time, maddened and still crying out, she went up the steps and into the house, tore at the pretty little Hitchcock phone table, the phone spilling in parts, the table's legs leaving the floor, its jaw dropping and the Glock 9mm nearly falling out: Pat caught it and was out the door with it and down the street calling out her ex-husband's full name, coupled with imprecations and obscenities her neighbors had never heard her utter before, but the Camaro was of course out of hearing and sight by then.

Gone. Gone gone gone. The world darkened and the sidewalk tilted up toward her as though to smack her face. She was on her knees, not knowing how she had got to them, also not knowing whether she would faint or vomit.

She did neither, and after a time got to her feet. How had this gun, heavy as a hammer, got in her hand? She went back in the house and restored it to the raped little table, and bent to put the phone, which was whimpering urgently, back together.

She couldn't call the police; he'd said — in the low soft voice he used when he wanted to sound implacable and dangerous and just barely controlled, eyes rifling threat at her — that if she got the police involved in his family he'd kill all of them. She didn't entirely believe it, didn't entirely believe anything he said, but he had said it. She didn't believe the whole Christian survivalist thing he was supposedly into, thought he would not probably take them to a cabin in the mountains to live off elk as he had threatened or promised, would probably get no farther than his mother's house with them.

Please Lord let it be so.

The elmer hovered grinning in her peripheral vision like an accidental guest in a crisis as she banged from room to room, getting her coat on and taking it off again, sitting to sob at the kitchen table, searching yelling for

the cordless phone, where the hell had it been put this time. She called her mother, and wept. Then, heart thudding hard, she called his. One thing you didn't know, about elmers (Pat thought this while she waited for her mother-in-law's long cheery phone-machine message to get over) was whether they were like cleaning ladies and handymen, and you were obliged not to show your feelings around them; or whether you were allowed to let go, as with a pet. Abstract question, since she had already.

The machine beeped, and began recording her silence. She punched the phone off without speaking.

Toward evening she got the car out at last and drove across town to Mishiwaka. Her mother-in-law's house was unlit, and there was no car in the garage. She watched a long time, till it was near dark, and came back. There ought to have been elmers everywhere, mowing lawns, taptapping with hammers, pulling wagonloads of kids. She saw none.

Her own was where she had left it. The windows gleamed as though coated with silver film.

"What?" she asked it. "You want something to do?" The elmer bounced a little in readiness, and put out its chest — so, Pat thought, to speak — and went on smiling. "Bring back my kids," she said. "Go find them and bring them back."

It seemed to hesitate, bobbing between setting off on the job it had been given and turning back to refuse or maybe to await further explanation; it showed Pat its three-fingered cartoon hands, fat and formless. You knew, about elmers, that they would not take vengeance for you, or right wrongs. People had asked, of course they had. People wanted angels, avenging angels; believed they deserved them. Pat too: she knew now that she wanted hers, wanted it right now.

She stared it down for a time, resentful; then she said forget it, sorry, just a joke sort of; there's nothing really to do, just forget it, nothing more to do. She went past it, stepping first to one side as it did too and then to the other side; when she got by she went into the bathroom and turned on the water in the sink full force, and after a moment did finally throw up, a wrenching heave that produced nothing but pale sputum.

Toward midnight she took a couple of pills and turned on the TV.

What she saw immediately was two spread-eagled skydivers circling each other in the middle of the air, their orange suits rippling sharply in the wind of their descent. They drifted closer together, put gloved hands on one another's shoulders. Earth lay far below them, like a map. The announcer said it wasn't known just what happened, or what grievances they had, and at that moment one clouted the other in the face. Then he was grabbed by the other. Then the first grabbed the second. Then they flipped over in the air, each with an arm around the other's neck in love or rage, their other arms arm-wrestling in the air, or dancing, each keeping the other from releasing his chute. The announcer said thousands on the ground watched in horror, and indeed now Pat heard them, an awful moan or shriek from a thousand people, a noise that sounded just like awed satisfaction, as the two skydivers — locked, the announcer said, in deadly combat — shot toward the ground. The helicopter camera lost them and the ground camera picked them up, like one being, four legs thrashing; it followed them almost to the ground, when people rose up suddenly before the lens and cut off the view: but the crowd screamed, and someone right next to the camera said *What the hell.*

Pat Poynton had already seen these moments, seen them a couple of times. They had broken into the soaps with them. She pressed the remote. Demonic black men wearing outsize clothing and black glasses threatened her, moving to a driving beat and stabbing their forefingers at her. She pressed again. Police on a city street, her own city she learned, drew a blanket over someone shot. The dark stain on the littered street. Pat thought of Lloyd. She thought she glimpsed an elmer on an errand far off down the street, bobbing around a corner.

Press again.

That soothing channel where Pat often watched press conferences or speeches, awaking sometimes from half-sleep to find the meeting over or a new one begun, the important people having left or not yet arrived, the backs of milling reporters and government people who talked together in low voices. Just now a senator with white hair and a face of exquisite sadness was speaking on the Senate floor. "I apologize to the gentleman," he said. "I wish to withdraw the word *snotty.* I should not have said it. What I meant by that word was: arrogant, unfeeling, self-regarding; supercilious; meanly relishing the discomfiture of your opponents and

those hurt by your success. But I should not have said *snotty*. I withdraw *snotty*. "

She pressed again, and the two skydivers again fell toward earth.

What's wrong with us? Pat Poynton thought.

She stood, black instrument in her hand, a wave of nausea seizing her again. What's wrong with us? She felt as though she were drowning in a tide of cold mud, unstoppable; she wanted not to be here any longer, here amid this. She knew she did not, hadn't ever, truly belonged here at all. Her being here was some kind of dreadful sickening mistake.

"Good Will Ticket?"

She turned to face the great thing, gray now in the TV's light. It held out the little plate or tablet to her. All all right with love afterward. There was no reason at all in the world not to.

"All right," she said. "All right."

It brought the ticket closer, held it up. It seemed to be not something it carried but a part of its flesh. She pressed her thumb against the square beside the YES. The little tablet yielded slightly to her pressure, like one of those nifty buttons on new appliances that feel, themselves, like flesh to press. Her vote registered, maybe.

The elmer didn't alter, or express satisfaction or gratitude, or express anything except the meaningless delight it had been expressing, if that's the word, from the start. Pat sat again on the couch, and turned off the television. She pulled the afghan (his mother had made it) from the back of the couch and wrapped herself in it. She felt the calm euphoria of having done something irrevocable, though what exactly she had done she didn't know. She slept there a while, the pills having grown importunate in her bloodstream at last; lay in the constant streetlight that tiger-striped the room, watched over by the unstilled elmer till gray dawn broke.

IN HER CHOICE, in the suddenness of it, what could almost be described as the insouciance of it if it had not been experienced as so urgent, Pat Poynton was not unique or even unusual; worldwide, polls showed, voting was running high against life on earth as we know it, and in favor of whatever it was that your YES was said to, about which opinions differed. The alecks of TV smart and otherwise detailed the rising num-

bers, and an agreement seemed to have been reached among them all, an agreement shared in by government officials and the writers of newspaper editorials, to describe this craven unwillingness to resist as a sign of decay, social sickness, repellently non-human behavior: the newspeople reported the trend toward mute surrender and knuckling under with the same faces they used for the relaying of stories about women who drowned their children or men who shot their wives to please their lovers, or of snipers in faraway places who brought down old women out gathering firewood: and yet what was actually funny to see (funny to Pat and those like her who had already felt the motion of the soul, the bone-weariness too, that made the choice so obvious) was that in their smooth tanned faces was another look never before seen there, seen before only on the faces of the rest of us, in our own faces: a look for which Pat Poynton anyway had no name but knew very well, a kind of stricken longing: like, she thought, the bewildered look you see in kids' faces when they come to you for help.

It was true that a certain disruption of the world's work was becoming evident, a noticeable trend toward giving up, leaving the wheel, dropping the ball. People spent less time getting to the job, more time looking upward. But just as many now felt themselves more able to buckle down, by that principle according to which you get to work and clean your house before the cleaning lady comes. The elmers had been sent, surely, to demonstrate that peace and cooperation were better than fighting and selfishness and letting the chores pile up for others to do.

For soon they were gone again. Pat Poynton's began to grow a little listless almost as soon as she had signed or marked or accepted her Good Will Ticket, and by evening next day, though it had by then completed a list of jobs Pat had long since compiled but in her heart had never believed she would get around to, it had slowed distinctly. It went on smiling and nodding, like an old person in the grip of dementia, even as it began dropping tools and bumping into walls, and finally Pat, unwilling to witness its dissolution and not believing she was obliged to, explained (in the somewhat over-distinct way we speak to not real bright teenage baby-sitters or newly hired help who have just arrived from elsewhere and don't speak good English) that she had to go out and pick up a few things and would be back soon; and then she drove aimlessly out of

town and up toward Michigan for a couple of hours.

Found herself standing at length on the dunes overlooking the lake, the dunes where she and Lloyd had first, but he not the only one, only the last of a series that seemed for a moment both long and sad. Chumps. Herself too, fooled bad, not once or twice either.

Far off, where the shore of the silver water curved, she could see a band of dark firs, the northern mountains rising. Where he had gone or threatened to go. Lloyd had been part of a successful class-action suit against the company where he'd worked and where everybody had come down with Sick Building Syndrome, Lloyd being pissed off enough (though not ever really deeply affected as far as Pat could ever tell) to hold out with a rump group for a higher settlement, which they got, too, that was what got him the classic Camaro and the twenty acres of high woods. And lots of time to think.

Bring them back, you bastard, she thought; at the same time thinking that it was her, that she should not have done what she did, or should have done what she did not do; that she loved her kids too much, or not enough.

They would bring her kids back; she had become very sure of that, fighting down every rational impulse to question it. She had voted for an inconceivable future, but she had voted for it for only one reason: it would contain — had to contain — everything she had lost. Everything she wanted. That's what the elmers stood for.

She came back at nightfall, and found the weird deflated spill of it strung out through the hallway and (why?) halfway down the stairs to the rec room, like the aftermath of a foam fire-extinguisher accident, smelling (Pat thought, others described it differently) like buttered toast; and she called the 800 number we all had memorized.

And then nothing. There were no more of them, if you had been missed you now waited in vain for the experience that had happened to nearly everyone else, uncertain why you had been excluded but able to claim that you, at least, would not have succumbed to their blandishments; and soon after it became apparent that there would be no more, no matter how well they would be received, because the Mother Ship or whatever exactly it was that was surely their origin also went away: not *away* in any trackable or pursuable direction, just away, becoming less distinct on the various tracking and spying devices, producing less data,

fibrillating, becoming see-through finally and then unable to be seen. Gone. Gone gone gone.

And what then had we all acceded to, what had we betrayed ourselves and our leadership for, abandoning all our daily allegiances and our commitments so carelessly? Around the world we were asking that, the kind of question that results in those forlorn those religions of the abandoned and forgotten, of those who have been expecting big divine things any moment and then find out they are going to get nothing but a long, maybe a more than life-long, wait and a blank sky overhead. If their goal had been to make us just dissatisfied, restless, unable to do anything at all but wait to see what would now become of us, then perhaps they had succeeded; but Pat Poynton was certain they had made a promise, and would keep it: the universe was not so strange, so unlikely, that such a visitation could occur, and come to nothing. Like many others she lay awake looking up into the night sky (so to speak, up into the ceiling of her bedroom in her house on Ponader Drive, above or beyond which the night sky lay) and said over to herself the little text she had assented or agreed to: *Good will. You sign below. All all right with love afterwards. Why not say yes?*

At length she got up, and belted her robe around her; she went down the stairs (the house so quiet, it had been quiet with the kids and Lloyd asleep in their beds when she had used to get up at five and make instant coffee and wash and dress to get to work but this was quieter) and put her parka on over her robe; she went out barefoot into the back yard.

Not night any longer but a clear October dawn, so clear the sky looked faintly green, and the air perfectly still: the leaves falling nonetheless around her, letting go one by one, two by two, after hanging on till now.

God how beautiful, more beautiful somehow than it had been before she decided she didn't belong here; maybe she had been too busy trying to belong here to notice.

All all right with love afterwards. When though did afterwards start? When?

There came to her as she stood there a strange noise, far off and high up, a noise that she thought sounded like the barking of some dog-pack,

or maybe the crying of children let out from school, except that it wasn't either of those things; for a moment she let herself believe (this was the kind of mood a lot of people were understandably in) that this was it, the inrush or onrush of whatever it was that had been promised. Then out of the north a sort of smudge or spreading dark ripple came over the sky, and Pat saw that overhead a big flock of geese were passing, and the cries were theirs, though seeming too loud and coming from somewhere else or from everywhere.

Going south. A great ragged V spread out over half the sky.

"Long way," she said aloud, envying them their flight, their escape; and thinking then No they were not escaping, not from earth, they were of earth, born and raised, would die here, were just doing their duty, calling out maybe to keep their spirits up. Of earth as she was.

She got it then, as they passed overhead, a gift somehow of their passage, though how she could never trace afterwards, only that whenever she thought of it she would think also of those geese, those cries, of encouragement or joy or whatever they were. She got it: in pressing her Good Will Ticket (she could see it in her mind, in the poor dead elmer's hand) she had not acceded or given in to something, not capitulated or surrendered, none of us had though we thought so and even hoped so: no she had made a promise.

"Well yes," she said, a sort of plain light going on in her backbrain, in many another too just then in many places, so many that it might have looked — to someone or something able to perceive it, someone looking down on us and our earth from far above and yet able to perceive each of us one by one — like lights coming on across a darkened land, or like the bright pinpricks that mark the growing numbers of Our Outlets on a TV map, but that were actually our brains, *getting it* one by one, brightening momentarily, as the edge of dawn swept westward.

They had not made a promise, *she* had: good will. She had said yes., And if she kept that promise it would all be all right, with love, afterwards: as right as it could be.

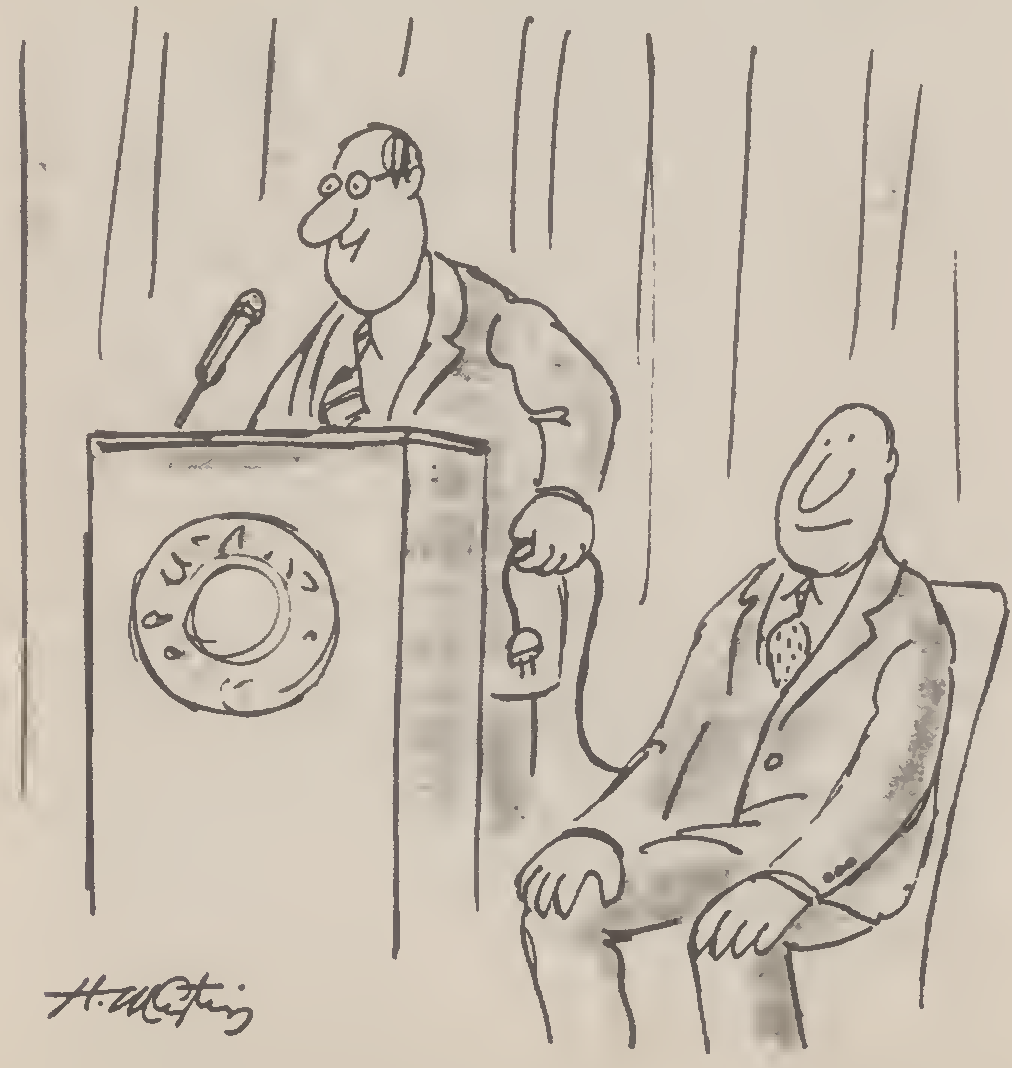
"'Yes," she said again, and she raised her eyes to the sky, so vacant, more vacant now than before. Not a betrayal but a promise; not a letting-go but a taking-hold. Good only for as long as we, all alone here, kept it. All all right with love afterwards.

Why had they come, why had they gone to such effort, to tell us that, when we knew it all along? Who cared that much, to come to tell us? Would they come back, ever, to see how we'd done?

She went back inside, the dew icy on her feet. For a long time she stood in the kitchen (the door unshut behind her) and then went to the phone.

He answered on the second ring. He said hello. All the unshed tears of the last weeks, of her whole life probably, rose up in one awful bolus in her throat; she wouldn't weep though, no not yet.

"Lloyd," she said. "Lloyd, listen. We have to talk." ☙



"...and now, with the details regarding his stance on foreign policy, affirmative action, Medicare, and unemployment, allow me to introduce Ed Cosenstock, candidate for President of the United States."

Dale Bailey's story, "The Resurrection Man's Legacy," (July, 1994) made the 1996 final Nebula ballot for best novelette. In addition to his stories here, Dale has published in Amazing, Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine, *and* The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror. *He has just completed his first novel.*

Dale has a talent for taking the conventional ideas of the genre and making them new. This time, he examines an F&SF *favorite: the magic shop.*

Interval of Stillness

By Dale Bailey

The sign said:

ERASMUS BRAND, MERCHANT
DEALER IN THE WEIRD, EXOTIC, & MARVELOUS
WHAT IS YOUR HEART'S DESIRE?

AND UPTON SPENCER, who was not without an interest in the weird, the exotic, and the marvelous; who very much wished to have filled his heart's desire, if only he could determine what it was — Upton Spencer paused.

He scratched his chin.

He looked up and down the long length of the street, vacant in the stultifying glare of mid-afternoon. In the cloudless sky, the sun blazed; heat coiled in visible waves from the sidewalks and the parked cars. There was not a single human being as far as he could see, and no sound either,

except somewhere far away the clamor of a car horn, blaring flatulent and intermittent in the stillness.

He looked back at the sign, which was certainly a curious sort of thing to encounter here, in a Midwestern city that in its banality seemed, to Upton, the epitome of the Midwest. In New York (he'd spent some time there), one expected such curiosities; for the New Yorker, they were the spice of life. And in San Francisco (he'd visited once), one sometimes encountered an oddity of this sort, tucked away in the nooks of the city, in the back alleys, beneath the hills. But here?

He scratched his chin again, placed his sample case on the sidewalk, and stepped closer. Hand-lettered in fading gilt paint, the sign was propped against the dirty glass. On either side of the words were curious designs — runes, he suspected, but he could not decipher them. What a strange place to discover, he thought, here in the most banal of Midwestern cities (he had only just arrived; he could not remember its name).

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was a quarter before three in the afternoon. It was his theory that occasionally, at three or thereabouts, there was a stillness in the world, as if everything all at once paused for breath, the hands of clocks ceased momentarily to move, and all things — men, women, and machines (for surely these were the components of the world) — paused to gather strength and energy to finish the day. Further, Upton believed that in this interval of stillness, the rational and the irrational, the sane and the insane, for a fleeting instant coalesced. In such moments, one could taste the true elixir of life (like cinnamon, he imagined); could smell the swift muggy gust of monsoons sweeping through distant India; could hear the rare trumpet of an elephant echoing across the African veldt, oceans away.

He had read of such things.

And so it was that he took yet another step forward, where another man, having noticed this curious sign, would have turned, retrieved his sample case, and walked quickly away, having made an appointment to show some carpet samples at Moulder's Carpet Emporium at four o'clock, and being anxious that he would miss that appointment, for it was a new and potentially lucrative client.

Upton, unlike other men, stepped forward, and shading his eyes with both hands, peered into the plate glass window at the interior.

Nothing. He saw gloom and gloom, and a swift movement suggestive of mysteries within the gloom, but he saw nothing else, except his own reflection, curved and distorted, so that his nose looked large and porous, and his hairline seemed suddenly to have retreated several inches. Upton stepped swiftly awav and his features collapsed into their rightful dimensions. His nose wa. slightly oversized, perhaps, but certainly one could not see the pores. And his hairline had, in fact, retreated only an inch or two; he thought it made him look distinguished.

But still he could see nothing within the store, except the curious sign and the gloom, and on the window ledge, a collection of dead flies and like debris.

He went in (how the hinges creaked!), and the door shut behind him with a sound like a thunderclap.

Silence and light, and a coolness that was not the coolness of air-conditioning, processed and artificially frigid, but a wholesome mountain chill.

Yes, Upton thought, that was it exactly.

And a voice said, "Can I help you?"

Upton turned, and there was Erasmus Brand, not at all as Upton had expected him. He had expected a wizard of sorts, he supposed; a being of majesty, dressed in crimson robes resplendent with arcane symbols, possessing, perhaps, a flowing white beard or, at the very least, a staff.

But no. Here was Erasmus Brand, a tall man, with an impressive head of hair certainly, sweeping in a dark wave from his high forehead, touched gray at the temples, but neatly trimmed. Here was Erasmus Brand, resplendent, yes, but in a suit of impeccable taste, tailored just so. Here was Erasmus Brand, handsome and urbane, extending to Upton his manicured hand.

Upton took it, and was impressed by its cool dry grip, firm and yet not so firm that he felt he was in some adolescent contest of strength (the approach most carpet store managers took to hand shaking, he had discovered).

"I saw your sign," Upton said. He gestured vaguely behind him.

"Indeed?" said Brand. "Do you wish to purchase or to sell?"

"Well, I — I don't know exactly."

"I see," said Brand, and he said it as if, in fact, he did see. As if nothing in the world was more common than a customer who did not know why he was there. "Then perhaps you'd care to look around?"

Upton nodded, and followed Brand to a nearby counter.

"This, perhaps?" said Brand, and he extended to Upton a mummified hand of some sort.

It was shriveled and desiccated and Upton thought that should he breathe upon it, it would crumble into a million dusty flakes. Still, it had some unique power. Though it was vaguely horrifying, for a moment Upton almost wished —

"Make no wish," Brand said, and swept the hand away.

He led Upton into the depths of the store, labyrinthine, Upton saw, and huge. Brand whisked him by all manner of things: a great shelf of books, smelling of leather and oil, where Upton paused to run his finger along a cracked and ancient spine ("Come away," Brand scolded him. "Some things are better left untouched."); a display of precious stones and jewelry, in the midst of which lay a single golden ring, precious in its simplicity; a glass bottle, in which floated a human finger, severed neatly above the knuckle.

"Here," Brand said, stopping suddenly. "This, I think, might interest you."

He held up a wooden box of intricate design, lifted the hinged lid, and out flowed whale songs, the cry of gulls, and the crash of midnight breakers.

"No," said Upton. "That's very nice, I'm sure, but that's not it at all."

Brand closed the box.

"It's your sign," Upton said into the silence that followed.

Brand lifted his eyebrows, but he did not speak.

"Your sign," Upton said. "The one outside. The rare, the exotic — my heart's desire. I think that's what I'm interested in."

"I see," Brand said. "Your heart's desire." He studied Upton for a moment, studied him out of eyes the color of October skies at twilight. His was the regard of an insect, measured and impersonal, and unutterably mysterious. "Such things aren't cheap, Mr. Spencer," he said. "I'm sure you understand."

Upton thought: But how did you know my name?

And then, because he was familiar with such shops, because he had known such men as Erasmus Brand (who might not be a man at all) — in short, because he'd read stories that began in precisely this fashion when he was a boy — another thought occurred to him, perhaps the most terrible thought he'd ever had. "The price," he said. "Is it...my soul?"

Brand laughed, a great roaring bellyful of a laugh that seemed to fill up the room with jollity. "Your soul!" he said. "Why, Mr. Spencer, there's so little of it left. Nothing in the world could be more useless."

Upton sighed in relief, and said, "Then what?"

"Why, your complacency. Merely that, my friend." Brand stepped toward Upton, draped his arm across Upton's shoulders (grown strong from lugging the sample case), and said, "Is that too much to ask?"

Upton stood there for a moment. He stroked his chin. He thought that he wasn't a very complacent man, after all, and it was really quite a bargain, this deal. For his heart's desire, whatever that could be. Then, he said strongly and with resolution, "No! No, that is not too much to ask!"

"Oh, wonderful!" said Erasmus Brand. He stepped away and clapped his hands in delight. There was a flash of light, a puff of smoke, and a vaguely sulphurous smell (sulphur? thought Upton).

Upton took a step back, and then, as quickly, two steps forward. For there, right there in Erasmus Brand's hand, rested a tiny ruby vial capped with a cork on a delicate silver chain. Whatever it might contain, Upton knew one thing for certain: *that* was his heart's desire. He wondered if it had been there all along.

"Now, then," said Brand. " — *NO!*"

Upton halted in mid-stride, shocked to discover that he held one hand extended, fingers poised to grasp the little bottle and clasp it to his heart. How very uncharacteristic, he thought.

"First," said Brand. "A condition."

And Upton nodded, for, of course, he had known there would be conditions. That was the way such things were done.

Brand held up a long white finger. "When you take the vial — and not until — you surrender to me your complacency as payment for services rendered. Agreed?"

"Oh, yes. But how?"

"The exchange will take care of itself. You needn't worry."

Upton nodded. He needn't worry. And Brand's long white finger folded into his palm.

"Very well, then," Brand said, "we're quite finished." He placed the ruby vial into Upton's hand and glided away.

But just as Upton had reached the door, had indeed begun to open it so that hot against his face fell a wedge of jaundiced sunlight, Brand said:

"There is one other thing, Mr. Spencer."

"What's that?" Upton asked, but he did not turn. He thought of Orpheus, who attained his heart's desire — and who lost it with a backward glance.

"Just this," said Brand. "You must drain the vial to the very dregs."

And then Upton stepped into the exterior glare, and the door shrieked closed behind him. People rushed along the busy sidewalk. Cars stood bumper to bumper, vomiting exhaust stench and a clamor of horns.

Upton glanced at his watch, saw that it was a quarter of three, and started up the street. Plenty of time to make his appointment at Moulder's Carpet Emporium, he thought, and slipping into his pocket the ruby vial (curious little item, he thought, now where did I pick that up?), he began to whistle jauntily, quite at ease with this most anonymous of Midwestern cities. Except...

And he paused.

Someone ran into him, flung him a curse, and went on.

Except...

...his sample case. Stunned, Upton stared down at his right hand, clenched as if around the much-worn handle of his leather case, but empty all the same. Perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him, he thought — hallucinations, perhaps, induced by the heat or the poisonous reek of the traffic. And so, experimentally, he rolled his shoulder beneath his blazer, worn slick by a thousand sales trips through Midwestern cities just like this one (whatever its name). There was no sensation of heaviness. Gone was the somehow comforting burden of the sample case he had carried for years.

Quelling an insurrection of panic, Upton forced himself to think. Vaguely, he remembered stopping before some shop-window, a book store perhaps, for he frequently found himself stopping in front of book stores to lament that he no longer had time to read. As a boy, he'd taken real pleasure in reading, gothic stuff, and fantasy, but these days there

just wasn't the time, not in his hasty march from city to city.

But — the book store (or whatever). He remembered stopping there to study the display, remembered placing the sample case on the sidewalk as he stepped closer to the window, and then...well, he must have turned away and strolled right up the street without it. It was probably still there, he told himself. Not to worry.

Turning, he started back in the direction he'd come.

But, of course, the sample case was gone.

And stranger still, Upton thought, so was the book store (if indeed, a book store it had been). He paused to study his surroundings, but there was no doubt. He was in the right place. It appeared that he had stopped to stare into a vacant store-front, tenanted solely by cobwebs and fly-corpses, and a faded sun-bleached sign.

Upton gazed up and down the congested street. An irritable mass of people surged by him, and he briefly entertained the hope that his sample case had only just been snatched, that he would see the thief amidst the throng. But he hardly knew what he would do in such a case, for he wasn't a brave man, or assertive (else he'd long ago have been promoted to the desk job for which he longed).

He stared at the vacant store-front for a moment more, and then the neighboring establishments: an appliance store, closed for remodeling, and a bar.

There perhaps, he thought. Perhaps some good Samaritan had left the sample case there for him to find. And in his panic, he forced himself to forget that good Samaritans were rare as passenger pigeons, or rarer.

He went into the bar, a dank lair where shadowy men hunched silent over drinks. Ceiling fans churned air sour with the stench of beer and perspiration; there was only the sound of the television, flickering like a blue ghost in the smoky darkness.

"Getcha somethin?"

Upton twitched, startled, and stepped to the counter.

The barkeep was sallow and balding, big with the massive flabbiness of an aging prize-fighter. "Well?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"I — that is, I thought... Well. I was hoping that perhaps someone had left a sample case for me," Upton said. "A leather case, oh..." He trailed off and held up his hands to indicate dimensions, but it was no use.

The barkeep shook his head. "Ain't nobody left nothing."

"Oh." Upton placed his hands on the counter and stared down at them, disconsolate. He glanced at his watch. Three-forty. More than anything, he did not want to call his supervisor.

"Look," said the barkeep, "can I getcha somethin or not?"

"It's like this. I was next door. I was just looking in the window. I thought it was a book store...or something. Anyway, I set down the sample case, and — "

"Look, pal, I ain't got the time for this, all right? You want a drink or what?"

"No thanks," Upton said (for he didn't drink), and the barkeep stalked away, muttering.

Upton glanced despairingly about, but no one moved to help him. He turned away. Outside, traffic belched poison into the afternoon. The next-door store-front gleamed vacantly in the glare.

It was nearly four o'clock. He had lost his sample case. He could not keep his appointment at Moulder's Carpet Emporium. There was nothing for him to do but return to his motel room, somewhere on the outskirts of this most anonymous of cities, there to call his supervisor.

With heavy feet Upton dragged himself through the clamorous sprawl. Leaving the motel at two-thirty, he had supposed it a pleasant day for a walk (after all, a salesman had to work to keep fit), but now the afternoon grew muggy and unbearable, the city nightmarish and claustrophobic. Buildings loomed like tumuli across the unswerving avenue; it seemed he walked through a city of the restless dead.

Fifteen minutes later, he reached his motel room. He sat on the edge of the bed and sipped tepid water from a plastic cup. The room, banal and anonymous as the city itself, was too cold and stank of disinfectant. Sitting there, Upton thought of all his time on the road, the countless motel rooms, the endless ribbon of highway narrowing before him to an indeterminate horizon. Last of all, he thought of the sample case, and his broken appointment at Moulder's Carpet Emporium. He had to call his supervisor. He had to call Frank Enderby.

He picked up the phone and punched the number hesitantly. The secretary put him through.

"Hello, Upton," the voice said. "What can I do for you?"

Upton was silent. He didn't know what to say.

"Hello? Upton? Upton, are you there?"

"I'm here, Frank," Upton said.

"Well, listen, Upton, I'm busy, you know. You can't just sit there. What can I do for you?"

"It's, well — " Upton paused again. An image came to him: Frank Enderby reclining in his plush office at corporate headquarters in New York (where Upton had merely visited), the vast city visible through the window behind him. Frank Enderby, who had started working for the company in the very same year as Upton, who had surpassed Upton in total sales for ten years running, who had long ago been Upton's friend, and who was now his supervisor. Frank Enderby, who in the interval while Upton paused, swore softly.

From five hundred miles away, the word hummed along the wires, surged through the receiver into Upton's ear, and began to work like vile poison. Upton imagined that single word, spoken by a man who had been his friend, rocketing through his system, parching the membranes of his lungs, clogging his veins like numbing contagion.

Frank Enderby said: "Goddammit, Upton. Aren't you supposed to be working the Moulder account right now?"

In the space of that single instant, Upton aged a thousand years. He had somehow metamorphosed, everything within him suddenly dry and fragile as the viscera of a mummy rooted after long centuries from beneath Egyptian sand. Out of the dusty pit of his belly, he dredged a single word, forced it up the arid and painful passage of his windpipe, into the cavern of his mouth. "Yes."

"Well, Upton, why in the hell aren't you?"

"It's... I, well, I lost my sample case."

"You what?"

"I lost my sample case." He took a long drink of the tepid water; with trembling fingers, he placed the empty cup on the nightstand.

"Well, for Chrissake, did you call them?"

Upton lay back on the bed and dropped his arm to his side. His fingers just brushed something in his pocket, something heavy (the ruby vial), and even as he spoke, he retrieved it. "No."

"Oh, for God's sake Upton, what were you thinking?"

And Upton, who held now in his hand the most curiously worked and beautiful of ruby vials, said quite simply and honestly, "I — I just don't know."

Enderby raged.

Upton tried to listen. He sat upright on the bed, cradled the receiver against his shoulder, and sincerely tried. But there was the ruby vial (how beautiful!), and even as Enderby spoke, Upton began diligently to loosen the tiny cork. Whatever could it be? And where had he gotten it?

Then the cork was free, swinging in handsome parabolas on its tiny silver chain.

"It's like this, Upton — " Enderby was saying, but Upton hardly noticed, for out of the tiny ruby vial flooded a wonderful melange of scents: the smells of ripe peaches and midnight rain, of fresh-cut grass on a summer day, of a morning fog drifting endlessly from the sea.

"Have you any idea of the importance of the Moulder account?" Enderby asked.

And Upton, who at that very moment was gently tilting the ruby vial so that a single drop of the precious fluid within dangled sparkling and iridescent from its lip — Upton said, "Of course, Frank." And just like that, the droplet fell to the end of his outstretched finger.

"'Of course, Frank'?" said Enderby. "'Of course, Frank'! You lose your sample case, you screw up what may someday be the most important account we have, you don't even bother to call them and explain, and all you can say is 'Of course, Frank'?"

"I'm sorry," said Upton. "I'm really truly sorry." And he plunged the finger into his mouth. It tasted just like cinnamon.

"Goddammit, Upton, I am sick and tired of this crap! Do you know how many times I've covered for you? Do you know how many times I've fought for your ass, even when your totals have dropped for five straight years? Have you any concept of the fact that there is only so much I can do for you? You listen to me and you listen good! You better call up Moulder's and fucking humiliate yourself with apologies! You better find that damn sample case! And you better do it yesterday, or I'll fire your — "

Upton said: "Why don't you go to hell, Frank?"

At the other end of the line there was only silence.

Upton held the receiver away and stared at it as if it had suddenly nipped him on the chin.

"What did you say, Upton?" The words were almost deadly gentle, the ensuing silence so deep and flawless that Upton heard a cool electric hum, like the breath of five hundred miles of empty circuits hushed in silent expectation.

And then, quite to his astonishment, Upton said: "I said, why don't you go to hell, Frank." He formed the words as clearly and precisely as if he was speaking to a child. As if he was possessed.

"You know, Upton," Frank said in the friendliest voice Upton had heard him use in a long time, "I think I've had about all I can take of your lousy sales record. I think it's about time we find someone for your territory who cares more about carpet stores than book stores. And most of all, I think your ass is finished."

To which Upton replied: "Those are the nicest words I've heard you say in years, Frank. I hope a heart attack drops you in your tracks."

He hung up the phone.

Holding the vial carefully, he lay back on the bed. Slowly, it all came back to him. The strange interval of stillness that fell across the world at three (or thereabouts), the hand-painted sign propped in the window of the vacant store-front: Erasmas Brand, Merchant.

What is your heart's desire?

He held the ruby vial up to the light and courage surged within him. Take that, Frank Enderby, he thought. You can go to hell. And for a fleeting instant he could taste that precious droplet of fluid, like cinnamon on the end of his tongue. Then it was gone.

Who was this Erasmus Brand? he suddenly wondered (for he had read of such things — those stories never ended pleasantly). And other memories also returned to him: the stink of sulphur (or was it brimstone?) when Brand conjured the vial from thinnest air, and that somehow unpleasant warning ("Drain the vial to the very dregs.").

"Oh, no," Brand had said, "I don't want your soul. What could be more useless?"

But what if he was lying?

Upton sat up, corked the tiny vial, and placed it on the nightstand. His courage had drained away; he was afraid. How had he forgotten so much?

Why had he spoken to Frank Enderby in that way — to Frank Enderby, of all people, who was his friend (his supervisor)? What was he to do now, for certainly he was not suited to find other employment? The company, for good or ill, had been his life for years, and he felt suddenly adrift and rudderless.

He glanced at the phone and thought of picking it up, of dialing Frank Enderby's number, far away in New York City. I'm sorry, he would say, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. He tried to form his lips about those two simple words, to give them weight and substance through utterance, but he was suddenly tired, so tired.

All at once, the vast weight of the day's events collapsed upon him — the heat, the walk, the stink of traffic in the dying air. Even as his lips shaped the words, as they hissed sibilant into the quiet room ("s-o-r-r-y..."), he slept, and sleeping dreamed.

Dark dreams. A coolness that was not the coolness of air-conditioning, but a frigid wind from between the stars (precisely). A dank lair where bestial men hunched snarling over their steaming kills. Erasmus Brand, handsome and urbane, stinking of brimstone as he opened a much-worn leather sample case (full of vials, Upton saw; a hundred ruby vials).

"Come back, come back! Upton, we need you!" cried a voice in his dreams, Frank Enderby's voice, and when he woke the voice seemed to hang for a moment in the silent room.

Early afternoon, the room emerald with muted sunlight behind the drapes. There was again the sound of an importunate voice — not Frank Enderby's — and a monotonous rhythmic fist against the door.

"Maid!" came the voice. "Maid! Anybody in there?"

Upton sat abruptly. "Yes!" he called. "An hour, please!"

Panicked, he looked at his watch. One-thirty. He sighed in relief. Plenty of time to shower and shave and have a quick meal before his appointment at Moulder's Carpet Emporium at four o'clock. Perhaps he could even walk there.

Yawning hugely, he stood, and standing, he saw the ruby vial upon the nightstand. There was a faint ephemeral stench of brimstone, and Upton Spencer (who had read of such things) felt his jaw snap involuntarily closed.

Not a dream.

He stared at the vial for a moment, crossed the room, and tore aside the heavy drapes. Shafts of moted sunlight fell into the room, and there on the nightstand was the ruby vial, real and substantial and astonishingly prosaic — a simple glass vial, vaguely luminous in the falling brightness.

Upton returned to the bed and uncorked the bottle swiftly. Liquid sloshed within, and a vaguely medicinal smell came to him, like cough syrup or rubbing alcohol.

And suddenly he knew what he had to do.

Upton corked the ruby vial and placed it on the nightstand. He showered quickly, dressed, and slipping the vial into the frayed pocket of his best blazer, let himself out into the heat.

Upton walked through the restless din of the city. Beads of sweat crawled down the knotted highway of his spine, and the streets seemed to shimmer behind the rising waves of heat. At a quarter of three, just as Upton passed the dim window of the bar, it began. Began as the slightest hush, a distant rumor of quiet that, growing, swept across the heartland and fell over the city like cerements of silence. In that timeless moment, entombed in that interval of stillness, Upton paused before the vacant store-front.

The sign said:

ERASMUS BRAND, MERCHANT
DEALER IN THE WEIRD, EXOTIC, & MARVELOUS
WHAT IS YOUR HEART'S DESIRE?

Upton went inside. The icy chill of the dark reaches between the stars enfolded him. Goosebumps rose along his back.

Erasmus Brand said, "So you're back."

Wrapped in a vaguely sulphurous smell (like brimstone), Brand glided from behind the counter.

Upton shuddered. "Who are you?"

Brand laughed. Upton, familiar with such shops, such men (he'd read about them), had expected Brand to laugh, a rich menacing baritone of a laugh, like the gloating mirth of a dragon, but it was nothing of the sort. It was a chuckle really, like smoke, unamused and rueful.

"Choices," Brand said. "Everyone faces choices, Mr. Spencer. Courage, complacency, whatever, everyone must choose. This was simply your moment — the fulcrum of your life — and I the agent of your dilemma. You have chosen."

Upton shifted on his feet uncertainly.

"You didn't drink it all," Brand said. "I warned you." He extended one long hand, his fingers unfolding from the palm like the petals of some slow-blooming flower.

With sudden reluctance, Upton dug the ruby vial from his pocket and placed it in Brand's palm. For a moment, just as he released it, there came to him a faint whiff of cinnamon, richly evocative, and a series of half-remembered images and sensations passed quickly through his mind: the long-familiar burden (somehow comforting) of the sample case he'd carried for years; the endless ribbon of the highway narrowing before him to an indeterminate horizon; last of all, Frank Enderby's stunned silence when Upton had said, "Why don't you go to hell, Frank?"

For a moment, as he stood there looking at the tiny ruby vial in Brand's palm, Upton wished to take it back. An inchoate longing for something, anything but this, swept through him, and he extended his arm, his fingers trembling —

But Erasmus Brand closed his fingers and the ruby vial was gone. "Too late, my friend," he said with a voice like October wind. "Too late."

And Upton turned away.

Outside, the sun fell jaundiced against his upturned face. Cars vomited pollution into the stagnant air. He stood in the midst of a jostling throng.

Upton Spencer looked at his watch, saw that it was a quarter of three, and scratched his chin. He glanced again at the sign in the window — a most curious sign, he thought, especially unique in this, the most banal of midwestern cities — and was stricken suddenly with the strangest feeling: that somehow, in a way that transcended his understanding, he had lost forever some singular opportunity. And then, despite the fact that he was not without an interest in the weird, the exotic, and the marvelous; despite the fact that he very much wished to have filled his heart's desire, if only he could determine what it was — Upton Spencer picked up his sample case and turned away.

It was getting late, and he had an appointment at four.

FILMS

KATHI MAIO

BIG BREAK, BAD FALL

AS CYNDI Lauper once wailed, "Money changes everything."

And she didn't mean for the better.

This is especially true of filmmakers and their films. Yes, a certain amount of money is necessary to get the job done, but a very minimal — by Hollywood standards — budget can produce a very handsome film. And although most young B-level directors, exhausted by their cheese-paring shoots, dream of what they could do with a big[ger] budget, too often what they do when they get one is fail.

I cannot count the number of times I've watched some fresh, frosh effort from a hungry young director and been excited by their potential — and impressed by what they were able to accomplish on a shoestring. Just as often, however, when that promising director makes the leap from independent/small-budget film it is right into the tarpit of Hollywood overkill. All that glitters tends to make for sparkling folly on the big screen. And, too quickly, lean, mean creativity gives way to bloated mediocrity.

Hence, I've come to dread seeing my favorite small-budget directors get their big Hollywood break. Case in point: John Dahl.

Mr. Dahl hails from Billings, Montana, and went to film school at Montana State. Talk about outre, the film program at Bozeman was so out of it, Dahl's own teachers told him that he didn't have a chance of making it in Hollywood. He nevertheless headed for L.A., and eventually landed work as a storyboard artist on *Robocop* and Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* and *Married to the Mob*. He also worked as an AD on a miserable B-movie

D&D rip-off, *The Dungeonmaster* (1985).

Dahl's first chance to helm (and co-write) a feature came with a neo-noir project called *Kill Me Again* (1989), which starred Val Kilmer and Joanne Whalley-Kilmer. A derivative but entertaining tale of a male dupe/hero and his fatal attraction, the film achieved only a very, very limited release before being dumped to cable and tape. Where, I might add, it eventually found an audience.

John Dahl's second feature, *Red Rock West* (1993), met a similar fate. In fact, it initially looked like that one would never see the inside of a moviehouse. It was dropped by both its original distributor and Columbia Tri-Star video, and was eventually sold off to HBO. It was after HBO picked it up that it won a theatrical cult following in a few markets. And, with a fine cast, including Nicholas Cage (as the Dupe/Hero), Dennis Hopper (as the Hit Man), J.T. Walsh (as the Sleazy Husband), and Lara Flynn Boyle (as the Wicked Wife), this second Western neo-noir found even more fans on cable.

And so, it probably came as no surprise to Mr. Dahl when his third thriller, *The Last Seduction* (1994), was rejected by the major studios, but embraced by HBO (as well as by film festival audiences here, there, and everywhere).

Still, it was no doubt disheartening for John Dahl to feel that his work was being relegated to the bush leagues of cable when people who know film were crowning him the new king of film noir. But, in my opinion, he should have felt only pride, and reveled in the knowledge that he was maintaining a film tradition. After all, many of the great noir classics of the late '40s and '50s were considered B-movies when they were released, too. And cable networks, hungry for movie product, have become the quality B-movie producers of today's marketplace.

Just look at Science Fiction film. Too few SF movies are produced by the major studios for theatrical release these days. But on cable, you can find all manner of science fiction and fantasy films, from the bizarre romance of *The Companion* to an oh-so-sincere biopic like *Roswell* to the alternative history of *Fatherland* (to name but a few that came out about the same time as *The Last Seduction*). Okay, cable movies aren't always brilliant cinematic art, but the nice thing is that no one asks them to be. And since they're not expected to

make back a gazillion bucks, the filmmakers can be left alone (with a smallish budget) to do something that might not meet with a studio's market projections for boffo box-office.

So it was with John Dahl. *The Last Seduction* was budgeted at well under three million. It was made on the cheap, but it sure doesn't look it. It is (if you like tough, noirish thrillers — as I do) as close to brilliant cinematic art as I've seen in recent years. It certainly deserved Oscar consideration — particularly for its star, Linda Fiorentino, as the most consistently malevolent, yet utterly convincing, femme fatale in ages. Unfortunately, *The Last Seduction* was ineligible for Academy Awards precisely because it backed into theaters (becoming a deserved art house hit) after premiering on cable. (Hey....Like *Hoop Dreams* in the documentary category, it was robbed!)

I don't want to go on at length about *The Last Seduction*, since it's about as far away from science fiction or fantasy as you can get. But I do want to point to it as an example of why cable (as today's B) movies are so important. And the quality of that film also explains why I — and so many other film fans — had high hopes for John Dahl when he finally got a budget of $20 million and a shot at wide distribution for his next film.

The fact that the film, called *Unforgettable*, was to be a medical/science fiction thriller made the prospects even more exciting. At least until the film was released. It pains me to say it, but *Unforgettable* is one of those movies you hope to forget as soon as it's over. And, small mercy, that's easy to do. The film is so confusing and muddled that it produces little in the way of a lasting impression with a viewer. It leaves one, only, with the vague wish that you could have the last two hours of your life back again.

The hero, if you can call him that, of *Unforgettable* also knows something about wanting to turn back the clock. His name is David Krane, and he is a hot-shot medical examiner in Seattle. But the murder case he'd most like to help solve is one for which he himself is the main — the only real — suspect. Krane's estranged wife, a prosecuting attorney, had been strangled and bludgeoned to death a while back. And when police had found the not-so-good doctor, in a drunken stupor, not far from the corpse, they — not surprisingly — had assumed that hedunit.

Only a legal technicality gets him off. But nothing can save him from his pariah status as a man identified as a wife-killer. He wants his life as a righteous man back. And he wants to regain custody of his two young daughters. That will probably never happen, unless he can break the stone-cold case — which seems like an impossibility. Then, one evening, Krane is dragged to a rubber chicken banquet. There, he hears an awkward female scientist present a scientific paper that leaves everybody else in the audience dozing over their chocolate mousse. Krane, however, is wide-awake, and eager to hear more. It seems that the researcher has had some success in transferring memory from one lab rat to another. And that gives David Krane an idea.

You got it. He wants to be the first human guinea pig in these experiments, so as to solve his wife's murder.

Before I go any further into this improbable story, let me say something about improbable casting — and wasted opportunities. The nerdy female scientist in *Unforgettable* is played by none other than Linda Fiorentino, *The Last Seduction's* steely deadly dame. Now, I admire loyalty as much as the next person, but I cannot fathom why Ms. Fiorentino would have taken this particular underwritten role. She is sadly unconvincing as a timid research geek. Although its doubtful that any actress could have done much with a character so passive and stupid.

Speaking of which, why must so-called "nerd" characters always be such bloody fools? It's one of movieland's more unfortunate — and unrealistic — cliches. And one that Mr. Dahl makes full use of. Fiorentino's Dr. Martha Briggs lets David Krane destroy, for all intents and purposes, her life's work. Then, she trails after him for the rest of the movie like a puppy dog, fluttering her hands and whining ineffectually about the dangers of Dr. Krane's self-experimentation.

Which brings us to an even more crucial bit of casting: that of David Krane, himself. The tortured hero of *Unforgettable* is played by Ray Liotta. And the role might have been perfect for him — if it had been written more sharply. Mr. Liotta is a talented actor, with sweet blue eyes that can turn cold and hard in a split-second. This has allowed him to play more than his share of psychos (e.g., *Something Wild*, *Unlawful Entry*) as well as the occasional sweetie-pie (*Corrina, Corrina*). As John Dahl indicated in

interviews, Ray was cast in the role of Dr. Krane precisely because he strikes us as being capable of killing his wife. Which raises the question of why this film didn't adequately take advantage of the audience's natural distrust of Liotta as Krane.

Unforgettable never throws any red herrings across Krane's path. And there is never any indication that Krane may be obsessively searching for his wife's killer because, in his heart of hearts, he fears that he indeed might be guilty of the crime. Toying with Krane's guilt, real or imagined, is something that might have made the film more challenging. And interesting. And there's no doubt in my mind that Ray Liotta is capable of playing that kind of ambiguous character. But the fact that the filmmakers never bother to follow through with this intriguing idea is just another indicator of how sloppy *Unforgettable* is.

But it's only one clue that this film is going to be a disaster. The central scientific conceit of the film is another. So, okay, a cocktail mix of drugs and somebody else's "cerebral spinal fluid" might permit you to experience a recent traumatic experience of the fluid donor. Sounds a little loopy, but I'll bite. But how long are we supposed to believe those "neuro-electric impulses" are supposed to remain potent in that solution? The film wants us to believe that a long-refrigerated vial of fluid will still retain those memory impulses months after being removed from a dead subject. Then it wants us to believe that it's not just recent experiences, like being murdered or having sex, that can be passed along. The transferable memories would reach all the way back into the donor's childhood.

Wow. That's one mighty shot-in-the-arm!

Want to suspend your disbelief that far? Well, I didn't. But I tried to be fair to the film, anyway. And I kept watching, hoping that *Unforgettable* would redeem itself. It never did. The film lost me forever shortly after Krane shot up the juice of a second woman, whom he suspects might have been killed by the same person who murdered his wife. This victim, unlike Mrs. Krane, clearly saw the man who murdered her. Our hero then goes to a police artist to collaborate on a composite portrait of the killer. When the artist has a hard time reproducing his vision, Krane grabs the charcoal and starts sketching himself...like a pro. You see, the young victim had been an art student, and a few cc's of her

body fluid had not only transferred her memories to David Krane, it had transformed the fellow into a regular Leonardo DaVinci.

But even that kind of nuttiness isn't the worst aspect of this movie. *Unforgettable* violates what I consider to be the ultimate sin for a science fiction film. A filmmaker may violate, when absolutely unavoidable, the logic of the real, as-we-know-it world, but s/he must never, ever, violate the internal reason of their own created world. This, *Unforgettable* repeatedly does — most notably in the way the flash-back-from-the-dead scenes are filmed. Very rarely, in this movie, do we experience the "traumatic event" as the victim (the person with the original memory) would have. The audience (that is, David Krane's) viewpoint is altogether different during these hand-me-down memories. Intermittently, it seems to be that of the killer. More often, it is simply the normal viewpoint of an audience — that of a third party who witnesses the desperate action from a short distance. Although these action scenes are well-shot, bloody and intense, they are also falsehoods against the film's own outlandish truth.

And, I might as well add, there are far too many of them. Martha Briggs warns her walking experiment of the dangers of being her first (far from clinical) human trial. It seems that the drugs used to heighten the memory transfer have an extremely damaging effect on the heart. (Her little rats have had a high incidence of coronary arrest.) We should have been so lucky with David Krane. The first time he experiences the death throes of his wife, murder victim #1, you'll likely find the scene creepy (and illogical), but undeniably powerful. But, by the time he's shot up his third stiff, you just which his heart would stop and the film would end. (But, no, he's *still* not finished with his death-tripping!)

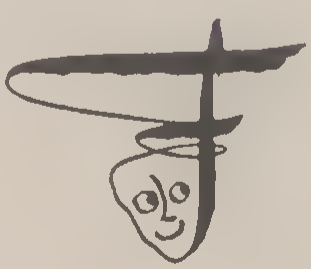
The thing that shocked me most about this miserable movie wasn't that it got made. (Projects that reek get green-lighted every day in Hollywood.) And, although I was mightily disappointed, I wasn't that surprised that a talented director like John Dahl would waste himself on dreck like this. (After all, he was no doubt extremely eager to make it into the big leagues after biding his time in the farm team of cableland.) What blew me away was that John Dahl wanted his name attached to this mess, not just once, but twice.

It is said that Dahl went through Writer's Guild arbitration to get a screenwriting credit for his brother

and himself for this, his breakthrough film. He might not have believed it at the time, but he dodged a bullet when he lost that battle. Now, in perpetuity, a poor sod named Bill Gettie (who, heretofore, was known primarily as a TV producer and writer) will get all the blame for this tedious, nonsensical screenplay. But, hey, I like to give blame where blame is due. And if John Dahl says that he and his brother re-wrote the screenplay for *Unforgettable* in a substantive way, I believe him. And I curse him for it. Because I know that this man is capable of much, much better.

The irony here, is that a fine film like *The Last Seduction*, which deserved a big splashy release, almost didn't make it to theaters at all. While *Unforgettable*, one of the worst films I've seen recently, made it to cineplexes across this great land. Where's the justice? Where's the *reason* in that? And what's to be done with John Dahl?

I say, give him another break. And hope that he has better taste and instincts next time. (His first student film was an SF/horror spoof called *The Death Mutants*, so I'd even give him another shot at an SF film, as long as he promised to do it right next time.) And if that doesn't work, send him back to the minors for his own good. With a small budget, and a little freedom, I know that this man knows how to make a good movie.



Alternate world fantasy is perhaps the most difficult to write, partly because those who've mined the territory in the past did it so very well. Finding stories that measure up to the classics of this subgenre is one of the hardest parts of my job. Fortunately, Marc Laidlaw has invented Gorlen, a bard with a gargoyle affliction. Marc's first Gorlen story, "Dankden," was one of the highlights of last year's October/November issue. "Catamounts" is his second Gorlen story — and he promises there will be more.

Catamounts

By Marc Laidlaw

"I HAVE MY LIMITS," SAID Gorlen Vizenfirth, hooking a full mug of cheap brew toward him with one of the petrified fingers of his stony right hand. A coarse black strand of beard-hair poked up from the foamy head like a sick fern's frond. "And you, sir, are quickly approaching several of them at the same time."

"The question is, how *bad* do you need the money?" The man whose beard had gone a long way toward sopping up Gorlen's drink possessed but one eye in a scarred socket; the rest of his face was no prettier. "Two hundred fifty auricles for a day's walk." He lifted his beard to his lips and sucked noisily. "More than enough to buy seafare out of Nagahast without engaging in your illegal profession."

Gorlen absently began a thoughtful plinxing of his eduldamer, which sat unwrapped on the tavern bench beside him. One-eye's hand landed warningly on his wrist, silencing him, but not before numerous heads had turned fearfully in his direction. To strum more than a few notes in

succession was to risk a steep fine under the Nagahast Nuisance-Noise Ordinances. Considering that he was down to his last few pents, he would more likely end up working off the fine in the sewers. Nagahast was a curse to a traveling bard; the sooner he abandoned it, the better. But he could hardly swim the Snool, and he hadn't enough to pay a traveler's fare. One-eye must have overheard him asking some sailors about crewman's work. They had laughed him off: a man with one stone hand was worse than useless among ropes. But two hundred and fifty auris would take him across ten inland seas like the Snool, in luxurious first-class cabins.

"Aren't you drinking this?" the man asked, eyeing the mug that Gorlen had pushed aside.

"Be my guest." He looked away from the toothless mouth, but could not so easily avoid the loud slurping. It was a relief when he heard the mug slammed down again on the wooden table.

"Ah...for that, my friend, I thank you. And in return I extend the offer of easy money." One-eye scratched an eczematous patch beneath his beard.

"If it's so easy, why don't you earn it yourself?"

"Well, now, for me it would be dangerous. But it'd be a childish task for you. Simply deliver a sealed parcel to old Dog, the wizard in the mountains. Run up, hand over the goods, hop back down. There you have it."

"And who would pay me for this task?"

"Why, Dog himself. It's half on delivery, you see."

"What of the other half?"

"I already spent that. Oh, but I earned it, getting what he needed. I've already done the hard work. Now old Dog wants his wands in the worst way, but I daren't go up to deliver them."

"That's the part that interests me," Gorlen said. "Why ever not?"

"Because I'd be recognized. You, you're a stranger. They won't bother you, I'm sure of it."

"They?" Gorlen said.

So much for easy money.

The plains rose gently toward the peaks above Nagahast, green giving way to rocky brown and then to solid gray heights. He looked back at the Snool, fog adrift over the bays and peninsulas, veiling the distant shores.

Tomorrow he would sail into that mist, but for now he had a long climb ahead of him, among gigantic sharpnesses of rock. He moved up a grating trail, rock rattling and sliding constantly underfoot. The walls looked blacker pace by pace, while the whiteness of clouds that crossed the gap intensified. Even this late in the morning, the granite gave off a chill more suited to midnight.

He hiked until his legs and his lungs did more than merely protest, then he sagged onto a flat slab of stone near a dripping spring. Swallowing a mouthful of dried fruit, he filled his cup from a rivulet tasting of ice, moss, and iron. As he sat contemplating the trail ahead, a warm body brushed against his ankles.

Gorlen jumped at the touch, recoiling onto the stone. A large gray cat with jade green eyes leapt up beside him. "Prrt," it said.

Chuckling, Gorlen stroked the cat's head. It was sleek-furred, strong, plump from a diet of mice and marmots; it seemed glad enough for human company to have been a housecat. Wondering if he had a spare bit of jerky, he started to unknot his travelsack. Suddenly the cat began to hiss at the other sack — the one he'd been hired to carry. It stood with arched back, hackles high, one paw poised defensively with claws extended.

"Now, kitty," he said amiably. "That's naught to do with you."

He reached to stroke the cat again, but this time it rounded on him, spitting and yowling. One wicked claw tore into his sleeve; he gave thanks he'd worn a padded jacket for the climb. Leaping from the slab, he snatched the bag and held it out in case the cat decided to leap. But the beast shrank back growling, ears lowered, head pressed to the rock, staring up at him venomously.

"I was going to feed you," Gorlen said reprovingly. The cat took another swipe at him. He let out a shout, feigning an attack, and the cat sprang from the far side of the rock. He heard no further sound.

Time to move on.

Now that was a changeable beast, he thought as he walked. Of course, many cats are fey that way. One moment they're in purring ecstasy as you pet them — the next instant, you've got fangs sunk deep in the meat of your hand.

The jolt of adrenaline refreshed him marvelously, and he settled into a pace he imagined would carry him to Dog's house well before sunset. He

had not reckoned on the ascent's increasing steepness. He came to crude stairs hewn from the rock; although he gained altitude quickly, the climbing was hard on his knees. By the time he sighted a landing above, he was once more in dire need of rest.

Then he saw the second cat.

It was a beautiful beast, thickly furred with spotless white, suited for hunting in the mountain snows. One eye was gold, the other green; both gleamed like stars. It seemed no more fearful of him than the first had been, but Gorlen was wary now, remembering the mercurial nature of most cats.

His wariness changed to pity as he climbed close enough to see that the poor cat was missing a limb, and sat propped unevenly on a single forepaw. He expected it either to flee or to greet him with a growl; but it betrayed nothing and sat immobile. He paused several steps below the landing. There was no way to skirt around the beast.

"Hello, puss," he said.

The white cat lowered its lids. He mounted a step closer.

"Poor puss," he said. "Little hoppy. How'd you lose your leg?"

The cat watched him intently, ears cocked. Their eyes were now at a level.

"Caught under a boulder, in a rock slide?" he said. "Nice kitty?"

Gorlen put out his right hand, the gargoyle-kissed limb of solid black stone. The cat merely sniffed. "Friends?" he said. It arched its back to rub against him. "Good kitty."

As he leaned to pet the cat, his bags swung forward from his shoulder. The cat reared back and struck at his stone fingers, screeching. Gorlen lashed out, clubbing the beast in the head. The cat lost its uneven footing and toppled off the landing. Gorlen hurried up the trail as the cat tumbled some distance down the steps. He looked back to see it sitting up dazed, shaking its head. Then he turned a sharp angle and all was hidden.

Gorlen kept his pace for perhaps an hour, even past the point where the stairs finally came to an end. It was not hunger that finally made him stop and throw down his bags. There was something in the sorcerous sack which frightened, angered, or repelled the cats. Anti-feline amulets, for instance. If the wizard Dog ever wished to come down this trail, he must have needed such items to repulse this couple of ferocious cats.

Gorlen looked at the light, lumpy sack for some time. The mouth of the bag was intricately knotted, and the knots were sealed with brittle wax. It was none of his business what he carried, and he couldn't consider jeopardizing his pay in order to satisfy a niggling curiosity. Nonetheless, he wished he could have access to the magic if it would ease his journey.

Stones rattled on the trail above. A dwarfish figure advanced slowly, with a peculiar and uncomfortable gait. Its growl was loud enough to echo in the confining chasm. Gorlen wished — not for the first time since taking his bardic oath — that he had not foresworn the carrying of weapons. He should have at least taken the time to select a sturdy walking stick that morning.

He sagged when he saw that the gnomelike creature was an orange tabby with orange eyes, its pupils gleaming like cut black jewels. He noted with more shock than pity that this aggressive beast lacked both forelegs. Having no other option, it walked on its hind feet, like a monkey or a man. Lacking arms, it also lacked an aura of real menace. Gorlen chuckled, his sense of bizarre irony overriding his instinctive distaste.

As the cat approached, Gorlen slung the magic sack over his shoulder. He did not find the cat particularly threatening; but he had learned discretion.

No sooner had he lifted the sack than the walking cat let out a wail and charged him. Gorlen screamed like a cat himself when the tabby sank its fangs into his calf. He threw it off at once, but it landed on its feet and came after him, hissing and howling.

Flight, and not discretion, now seemed the wisest course.

The cat gave a spirited chase, but they soon reached a place where the gorge widened slightly and the trail was heaped with broken boulders. It was hard enough for Gorlen to hop from stone to stone; but the pursuing cat immediately lost its footing and vanished into a chink.

After that, loose rock was everywhere, an unnerving symptom of frequent avalanches. Old snow lay between the rocks and dirty ice crusted the walls. Gorlen stooped with his cup to catch meltwater and drank it without breaking his erratic stride. He dug into his sack for nuts, fuelling himself without pausing. Inevitably, his pace slowed. He thought about the cats he'd passed, contemplating the progression of their mutilations, and it was thus with very little surprise that he spotted cat number four

up ahead. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw that this once-handsome calico retained but a single limb — her left hind leg.

He wondered how long she had been watching him with her calm, meditative blue eyes. Perched at the edge of a rock-strewn ledge, her single leg stretched out behind her in a rare spot of sunlight, she licked her chops, presiding over a heap of small cracked bones.

"Now you," he said, mainly to himself, "don't frighten me at all."

She gave him a look as if to say, *Oh, really*?

Stretching langorously, she extended her hind leg until her toe pads brushed an enormous granite boulder that teetered on the ledge. It was the lightest of touches, but the boulder began perceptibly to shift.

"Now, now," Gorlen said. "Nice kitty."

The cat yawned, ribcage stretching under the fur, hind leg reaching still further. The enormous rock grated, tipping. Gorlen skipped a few steps up the trail, nervously shooing at the cat. The calico rolled onto her back, a kitten's playful move, and gave the boulder an unimpaired rabbit-kick.

Gorlen darted sideways, though there was nowhere really to dart. He found himself on the wall of the ravine, trying desperately to climb, like a spider trapped in a basin. The huge stone crashed from the ledge. Looking up at the oncoming rock, now seemingly afloat on a clattering tide of lesser fragments, he knew he could never climb high enough. Resting his weight on his stone hand, he threw his body higher. The boulder crunched over his arm and went on, carrying the storm of thunder, dust and gravel away down the gorge.

Gorlen looked down at his unscathed black stone hand, which knew nothing of pain. He had never been so grateful for the gargoyle affliction.

On her ledge, the cat no longer looked so haughty. As Gorlen strode angrily through settling rock dust, she slunk back as best she could. The thought scarcely penetrated his anger that it might be unwise to confront a pussycat that had only just now, ever so casually, kicked off an avalanche in his honor. He leapt onto the ledge, prepared to deliver a powerful blow to the cripple's frail-looking ribs.

But the cat looked so pathetic.... One-legged, she regarded him with a bitter hatred that for a moment he could almost understand. Anger vanished.

He kept an eye on her as he climbed past, but she made no further move.

It occurred to him to wonder how the sorry cats had lost their limbs. Did they owe the losses to some improbable chain of natural events — rock falls, fights with vicious predators...or even with each other? But the wounds were cleanly healed, as if sewn and tended; the fur grew thick with no sign of scarring. And there was something ritualistic about the injuries. The cumulative amputations suggested a human agent. No wonder then they hated men, and lay in wait for any who might mount this path.

The sky grew purple, the clouds showed orange edges. Now came occasional promising glimpses of peaks above, which suggested that he was near the end of his climb. He would be out of here by nightfall, if his luck held.

He had become gradually aware, as the ravine darkened further, of soft rattling sounds somewhere near him on the trail. He could not be sure if the noises were above or behind him — signs of pursuit or of ambush. He softened his own steps, although he could be only so quiet on the loose rock.

It occurred to him that he was waiting for cat number five.

The very thought of such a creature filled him with horror, though he could not imagine how it might possibly harm him. Still, he had underestimated cat number four, to his peril.

It was a relief when his view of the evening sky continued to expand. He could feel wind now, blowing down from snowy peaks that came clearly visible above. But he felt no less vulnerable on the open slopes, where in the dusky light every twisted bit of blown, weathered wood looked like a snaky figure lying in wait. Due to fatigue and eyestrain, each of these shapes seemed to writhe and wriggle toward him in the gray light, moving sinuously, furtively through the stones.

Shortly after sunset, the slope leveled out in a forest of ancient dwarf pines. The trail continued into the clutching trees. I'm safe, Gorlen thought, for he had come to associate danger exclusively with the rocky defile and its denizens.

Yet, several minutes' fast walk into the bleak woods, he recognized his relief as premature. It was far darker here than on the slopes; a scant few miserly stars blinked through the black needles. His eyes swarmed

with weird lights and shapes, symptoms of hunger and exhaustion. Worst of all, the sounds he'd heard on the last part of the climb seemed still with him, though altered in character to suit the changed terrain, muffled now by mulch and moss.

It's weariness, he told himself, but all the same he grabbed a shattered branch — and not for use as a walking stick. He was crossing an icy creek where darkness gathered like cold air, when he heard a slithering crash behind him. He leapt to the far bank and spun back with a cry, brandishing the stick.

There was nothing behind him but the fading trail, and a sense of unseen danger drawing near. He searched the stunted trees, flinching from a dark ropy shape until he realized it was a beard of hanging moss. Shaking off his nervousness, he devoted himself to the trail.

Finally, as the last trace of light leached from the air, he saw a house ahead of him. Flames were kindling in the thick bubbled windows; a thin drift of smoke uncoiled from the chimney. Gorlen raced himself to the door, and hammered till he heard an answer.

The fellow who opened the door was naked, but patched all over with so much hair that at first Gorlen thought he wore a moldering hide. The wizard Dog, who looked part dog himself, peered at Gorlen, then one furry finger darted out and snatched the sack from his shoulder.

"This — " Gorlen started.

"Yes, yes!"

The gruff Dog danced gleefully toward the fire, hugging his sack without a backward glance. Gorlen stepped in and shut the door behind him. The sorcerer continued to ignore him as he laid the bag on a table spread with stuffed birds, crushed powders, and less identifiable oddments.

"Took long enough," he mumbled. "How many months has it been since I sent you out?"

"That wasn't me," Gorlen said.

Dog craned around to peer at him. "I thought you looked too good to have weathered all the spells I've been slinging to draw you back here."

"Yes, I still retain both my eyes."

"Well, I've got my wands, and that's what matters." He busied himself examining the seals; satisfied with their virginity, he snapped them to bits and began to unknot the ties.

Gorlen cleared his throat loudly. "There is one more thing that matters," he said. "My payment. Two hundred and fifty auricles."

The magician rounded on him. "Payment? After all this time? After you delayed my work for how long? I wouldn't give you half a green pentacle! You'll be lucky if I don't extract payment from *you*! I'll find uses for your parts if you persist in pestering me!"

Gorlen was rarely dumbstruck, except in matters of money.

"No answer to that, eh? Wise fellow. Now leave the way you came, make no fuss, and I just might let you go unharmed. Off with you now, off-off, before I send something to snap at your heels!"

Gorlen did not move, but Dog must have thought that an order from him was congruent with the deed. He upended the sack, sending its contents tumbling over the table. Gorlen's shock at being swindled gave way to a graver dismay when he learned what he had carried up the pass.

Ten furry wands lay scattered on the scarred, charred tabletop like jointed jackstraws. Chuckling, still oblivous to Gorlen, Dog arranged the wands in an obvious order: first the white one, then the pair of striped gold, followed by three of dappled calico, and the final four of purest shiny black.

Angry disgust swept through him like a fever. He nearly leapt on Dog's repulsive back, but it was scabbed and matted from louse and flea infestations, and he couldn't quite bring himself to touch the mage.

At that moment he heard soft scratching at the door.

"About that payment," Gorlen said.

Dog remained bent over his workbench, doting on his treasure. "Are you still here?"

"I'll consider the debt paid when some others have collected what they're owed."

"This is my last word on the matter: Begone!"

"Gladly," Gorlen said, and opened the door.

The gray cat sat on the stoop, blinking up at him. Gorlen stepped outside and pushed the door wide, bowing low. The cat gave a soft meow of recognition, then stepped quietly — as only a cat can step — into the cottage. Behind it came the white cat, pointedly ignoring him as it limped up the steps and went in. "I do apologize," Gorlen whispered. Next came the orange tabby, skipping eagerly forward on its hindlegs, rushing

through the door. And then the potent calico, thrusting herself along with her sole limb, leaping more agilely than he might have suspected in a kind of pouncing pogo motion.

There was a moment when Gorlen thought the fifth cat would never appear; then he realized that he was looking at it, so black that it appeared of a piece with the darkness. It slithered snakelike up the trail, its sad shoulderblades digging rapidly into the earth like blunt little spades under the folds of furry skin. Its whiskers were frayed and twisted; its bony frame and dusty black coat suggested an unimaginably hard life. The kinked tail had been severed midway and crushed at several points along its remaining length. Even so, the cat impressed Gorlen with reserves of unguessable strength. He received the distinct impression that it had been waiting for this moment.

The cat, in sliding up the steps, suddenly swerved toward Gorlen. He leapt back fearfully, but there was nowhere to go. It darted toward his feet, and he nearly shrieked when it touched him.

But all the poor beast did was twine betwixt his ankles, emitting one loud purr, like a contented puss on its way to a full saucer.

Once all were inside, Gorlen eased the door shut. The last thing he saw was the five cats advancing slowly, each in its own unique fashion, toward the preoccupied Dog. Their utter silence inspired his own retreat.



SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE

YOU MAY have noticed that novels, movies, and TV tend to promulgate a decidedly biased history of human group interaction.

The other day I saw a rerun of a movie in which hairy hominids discover the delights of winning by bashing other animals and each other with large femurs as weapons.

Since a femur thrown into the air eventually becomes a majestic man-made structure in space, the movie goes along with the common idea that after learning the survival technique of killing efficiently, humanity could progress to such salutary activities as the industrial revolution and space travel.

We love histories and fiction that emphasize exciting war over dull peace. It seems so logical: if the biggest and bravest of our tribe decimates the biggest and bravest of the neighboring tribe, we will be the master race and our increased lebensraum — excuse me, hunting territory and living space — will insure better survival rates for our nearest and dearest.

Our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, sometimes still use this survival technique. They not only kill monkeys for food but occasionally war against other chimp bands.

We higher primates called humans have come to know better — helped by visions of civilization-obliterating mushroom clouds — and have become much too civilized to indulge in dubious survival adjuncts like terrorism, war and genocide...

Where was I? Perhaps I should now mention that chimps have rituals for making peace, and even humans sometimes convene at conference tables instead of going to

war — both thanks to an ancient survival technique, the subject of this essay.

Before I get into this technique, I must review some of the many notions about improving survival that I worry about (you probably have your own list). Most of these notions are antiquated and many of them dangerous.

"Down with technology; up with simplicity" sounds good. I'm all for simplicity, spending many hours getting rid of things, organizing what's left, and trying to get control of the various material and non-material complications of my life.

For instance, it's simpler to send a manuscript from one computer to another by modem than to print it out and trust it to the Post Office, but I'm all too aware that this "simplicity" depends on extremely complicated technology which I don't understand, can't control, and which can go wrong.

As that marvel of the Learning Channel, James Burke, says about current technology, "Never have so many people known so little about so much."

I'm reminded that after the Los Angeles earthquake, my modem could not link up electronically with the one at the L.A. Times Syndicate, not for days. Nobody seemed to know (or to be able to explain to me) what the glitches were, and in this case it might have been simpler to mail my science column to them. Fortunately I could afford to wait for the resurrection of technology because I had achieved the ultimate simplicity — getting safely ahead of schedule.

All those back-to-nature and down with technology people don't seem to realize that if you want to survive today it's unlikely that you'll do it by going "back to the soil" and raising your own food.

There are so many humans on Earth that most of them can be fed only with the aid of advanced technology. In fact, all it takes is a couple of years of drought in one area to show that the world's population is living on the edge. As James Burke puts it, "Technology is a life support system."

Then there are the people who are rabid about the evils of centralized government. They think survival (theirs, at any rate) depends on returning to a tribal society — one that will be their color, religion, and political point of view, of course.

These people think they'll be the tribe to survive because they have stock-piled the most weapons and are better able to disregard the

injunction to love one's neighbor — forgetting that the factories for making weapons may be in the hands of said neighbors. (If you're planning to use bows and arrows, you'd better own enough of the proper vegetation for making same.)

People who want to return to the tribe cannot grasp the fact that unless meteorites or superbombs wipe out most of us, we're not only stuck with technological civilization, but we have to have governments to organize it.

Central government has its drawbacks. For instance, nobody likes doing the paperwork involved in being a tax-paying citizen (unless they are paid for doing said paperwork. I haven't seen many homeless tax accountants lately).

People also resent having their lives on record somewhere, but it's ridiculous to mind when government seems to turn into a supercomputer with every citizen's vital statistics and activities registered in cyberspace. That's better than being closely watched by disapproving village elders who don't like your friends or the way you do your hair or the way you think.

Central government has to operate with money, and that means taxes. You object to paying taxes, yearn to balance the budget?

Balanced budgets sound great. With balance, expenditures do not exceed income. If you reduce expenditures and increase income to match, you get Mr. Micawber's "result happiness."

The trouble is that balanced budgets were easier to have when the world had fewer people, in smaller communities. If the community is small enough, you don't need money, only a fair exchange of goods and services.

Balanced budgets might even be possible today if our overpopulated, complicated world could operate with those rare commodities — good common sense and unselfishness. Lots of luck.

Unfortunately, many people convince themselves that in spite of lowered taxes, it will be possible for *them* to have what they want — like a hefty raise (especially if they're in top management and already earn a couple of million), compensation for being out of work, support for old age, and a strong military equipped with impressive modern weapons to fight off nasties from other parts of Earth or from another galaxy.

Tax money is not evil. It's not even a "necessary evil." Tax money can be a powerful force for good when it is used to promote a stable

society in which people can prosper, or at least survive without having to kill each other.

We tend to repeat the mistakes of history when we don't know them, so it's well to remember that revolutions start when there are many people without resources and hope. You can no longer pretend that the tribe over the hill will starve to death and leave you alone to hunker down in your own well-stocked bunker.

But — living on the Eastern Seaboard, in the most complex and vulnerable city in the world — I may be slightly prejudiced.

Anyway, I admit that organic life has always had one major problem: how to survive. I do not believe, however, that survival is mainly a product of the murder and mayhem we create in fiction or real life, or that the likes of Freud and Lorenz were right.

Many modern thinkers are admitting that there's a lot wrong with the prior emphasis on nature being mainly "red in tooth and claw." Thinkers are also rethinking the idea that humanity has to cope with its inborn "animal instincts" for aggression and murder. Something else matters — co*operation*.

Papers and books are claiming that many non-human animals have complex social lives full of moral behavior and even hints of consciousness. A few authors say nice things about humans.

There is, however, a current fight between the wordy advocates of "group selection" and "individual selection" in the development of "moral" behavior in animals (I can't stop putting that word "moral" in quotation marks, because it is such a human chauvinist word).

Perhaps it's best to avoid getting into the fight over "group" versus "individual." I will try to explain the reasoning behind my bias.

Almost anyone closely observing chimpanzees and humans can admit that those closely related primates are capable of what seems to be altruistic behavior — like helping each other out, making peace between arguing companions or between each other, sharing, sacrificial giving, and assorted ways of working cooperatively together.

Now consider. If a primate does something that looks altruistic and is of benefit to the group, is she (it's often, you should excuse the female chauvinism, a she) doing it because her behavior has been selected for in evolution, the individual mattering little and the group a lot?

Or is this charming primate being altruistic for conscious or unconscious selfish reasons because whatever she does ultimately benefits her, the individual?

Or are her *genes* doing it for selfish genetic reasons because if she's nice to Big Daddy her genes could happily mingle with his in the next crown prince?

Maybe all the above or perhaps none of the above actually fit a specific case. Does the "why" matter as much as how the cooperative behavior changes those who use it, and the others with whom they live?

How about your own small primate? If your child toddles over to you and wants to help you knead the dough or polish the car (assuming you don't have machines to accomplish these arts), do you send her/him to an expensive analyst to find out all the possible reasons why the kid is doing this? For example:

Is the child expressing the "love thy neighbor as thyself" kind of love, or the "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" kind, or are they the same thing?

Perhaps the child doesn't feel any love but only a calculated determination to get in good with his/her parent, because one of those gift-laden holidays is approaching.

Could there be a Freudian desire to seduce the parent of the opposite sex? Or if it's the same sex, is there a desire to bond against the common enemy?

Perhaps the kid is just reacting to a prior scolding about being selfishly preoccupied with television or the family dog or his/her own body parts and knows he/she had better shape up as a helpful family member or else.

Is she/he feeling the insatiable curiosity of the natural, not-thoroughly-civilized primate in a primitive scientific quest to understand the unknown?

Or maybe the child has the equally insatiable desire to be able to do what the grownups can do.

That's a thought. Every primate infant imitates its elders. But then, so do most animals that are raised by older members of the same species. Is this desire coming from the genes of a social animal, telling their victim to learn how to survive, so those genes will be passed on?

We're back to survival again. My point is that whatever the hidden motives — real or imagined by analytic probers — your kid is taking a first step towards being a cooperative animal. Don't knock it.

And don't overemphasize the differences between "collective interests" and "individual interests," and whether or not "moral" behavior is ultimately self-serving. With humans, it's usually difficult to postulate that individual self-interest is not also tinged by collective interests, and vice versa.

Some animals seem to remember the past and perhaps think about the future, and some few are self-aware. We humans (most of us, that is) are not only aware of ourselves and our passage through time, but also of our own eventual death. Everything we do is colored by this knowledge, plus all the other aspects of human knowledge that make human existence so complicated.

Individuals and groups get rewards from observing, learning about, and imitating cooperation, that marvel of behavior that helps us humans cope with our self-awareness, our sense of mortality, and our organismic need to survive.

There are, however many examples of cooperation that antedate us, going back along the tree of life. Way back.

Many animals that can neither see nor think use cooperative living as a way of doing better. For instance, a very primitive ancestor of us vertebrates is the ocean-dwelling tunicate, which has no brain.

Tunicates named *Botryllus schlosseri* cooperate rather drastically, fusing bodies to make a bigger colony. According to Richard K. Grosberg and James F. Quinn of the University of California, these tunicate colonies have "immune systems" that can detect other *B. schlosseri*, and will send out chemicals to repel any tunicate that is not kin. In this case, cooperation means all in the *family*.

There are also many well-known instances of two-species animal cooperation in symbiosis. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria live in and help legumes. When we grow legumes, those bacteria help replenish the soil we have depleted in growing non-legume crops.

Luminescent bacteria named *Vibrio fischeri* live in a squid named *Euprymna scolopes*, making it luminescent. When *Euprymna* are newly hatched and devoid of bacteria, only *Vibrio fischeri* can enter and "infect" their light organs.

Recently a strange little organism was found living on the lips of lobsters, eating food the lobster doesn't quite swallow. This organism doesn't seem to benefit the lobster but it may in some way we

haven't discovered, for the lobster seems to make no effort to get rid of it.

There are famous cooperative colonial animals like bees and naked mole-rats, each colony with one queen, several males, and many offspring who raise each other and care for the queen.

Heterocephalus glaber — the naked mole-rat — was thought to be a xenophobic beast, staying in its own colony, cooperating only with its own group, and inbreeding like mad. This idea has recently been overturned by the research of M. Justin O'Riain, of the University of Cape Town and his colleagues.

It turns out that cooperation for the good of the group can demand unusual behavior called "inbreeding avoidance mechanisms." O'Riain found that when the *Heterocephalus* colony is too inbred, an occasional male becomes much heavier and is reluctant to mate, even when his own queen is in oestrus and receptive. These "disperser" males tend to leave and mate with mole-rats from other colonies.

The social organization of prairie voles in midwest North America has been studied by Lowell L. Getz of the University of Illinois and C. Sue Carter of the University of Maryland. When there's less food in the tallgrass prairie where the voles live, they tend to be monogamous, an intimate cooperation that keeps the male from having to hunt for females, and insures that offspring will survive better because both parents feed them.

Voles do, however, form communities, especially when food is more plentiful. And these communities get larger after snakes, the local top predator of voles, go into hibernation. In these communities, some offspring stay celibate and at home, cooperating with their parents in raising their siblings.

There are many other relatively unfamiliar examples of animal cooperation. There are also reams of new data about primates, with articles bearing titles like "Simian Sympathy," "Chimps Rise Above the Law of the Jungle," and "Chimps show Roots of Morality and Justice." I advise reading primatologist Franz de Waal's new book, *Good Natured*.

It's tempting to go on about chimps, but let's go back to simpler animals — like termites, host to microorganisms that live in the insect's gut and digest the wood it eats. One of these symbiotic microorganisms is a protozoan named polymastigote, which moves around only because spirochete bac-

teria attach to it like tiny outboard motors.

Yes, microorganisms cooperate. None of us multi-cellular organisms would be here if they had not done so. Our bodies are made of eukaryotic (nucleated) cells, the product of bacterial cooperation.

We're fairly certain that bacteria appeared on Earth about 3.9 billion years ago in the Early Archean. They are one-celled organisms with their genetic material, DNA, distributed loosely instead of confined to a nucleus.

The first bacteria could survive better if they ate more of the chemical nutrients around. Eventually there were so many that they began — horrors — to eat each other, but soon life became more than eating and avoiding being eaten.

The enormous success of bacteria (in the opinion of many, they still rule Earth) may be due to their ability to swap genes, including mutated genes. This and their rapid reproduction helps them cope with whatever the world (including us) throws at them.

For instance, recently a certain kind of food poisoning has been on the rise, caused by the way genes from one kind of bacteria can jump to another.

Shigella bacteria belong to the family Enterobacteriaceae, whose bodies contain rods that stain gram-negative in the laboratory. All *Shigella* bacteria cause dysentery in monkeys and humans because they produce a Shiga toxin, named for Kiyoshi Shiga, who discovered it in 1898.

Escherichia coli is another Enterobacteriaceae found in the feces of most mammals. *E. coli* is important in research (it often seems as if papers on *E. coli* appear every minute), and although it can be pathogenic, particularly if it gets into the urinary tract, we usually tolerate it fairly well.

The latest story is that the gene for Shiga toxin has succeeded in jumping to *E. coli*, according to the work of David Acheson and Gerald Keusch at Tufts New England Medical Center. Evidently the Shiga gene merrily cooperates inside the *E. coli* body, causing the same production of toxin that it did in *Shigella* — and giving dysentery to the unlucky animal infected by that *E. coli*.

This ease of gene alteration and swapping in bacteria made it inevitable that brand-new kinds would arise in evolution. Three and a half billion years ago the cyanobacteria developed photosynthesis — using the energy of sunlight to split water into hydrogen and oxygen. The

cyanobacteria kept the hydrogen and excreted the oxygen, polluting Earth's atmosphere with it (from the point of view of the other, anaerobic, bacteria).

Soon, however, new bacteria developed that not only coped with the oxygen-polluted atmosphere but used it to advantage.

Finally, 1.5 billion years ago, the first eukaryotic cells appear in the fossil record. Eukaryotic cells have their DNA in chromosomes, inside a nucleus, and their cytoplasm contains several kinds of "organelles" now thought to be former free-living bacteria.

American biologist Ivan Wallin said 70 years ago that a eukaryotic cell is a colony of microbes that once lived separately and are now joined in cooperation. This idea has finally become widely accepted, mainly through the work of microbiologist Lynn Margulis at the University of Massachusetts. Don't miss her book (with Dorion Sagan), *What Is Life*.

For instance, each eukaryotic cell contains oxygen-using mitochondria that are descended from those same bacteria that had learned how to use the oxygen made by the cyanobacteria.

Plant cells have, in addition, chloroplasts that are descended from cyanobacteria and perform photosynthesis. Each plant or animal cell is a study in cooperation.

Margulis and Dorion Sagan say, "These new cells...brought the kinds of individuality and cell organization, the kind of sex, and even the kind of mortality (programmed death of the individual) familiar to us as animals."

It is likely that this intimate cooperation goes back beyond the invention of what we would call life. Before the first bacteria appeared, certain chemical molecules began helping other molecules replicate themselves.

Martin A. Nowak, at the University of Oxford, and his colleagues Robert M. May and Karl Sigmund have run computer experiments to show the rise and persistence of cooperative systems. They say, "In the course of evolution, there appears to have been ample opportunity for cooperation to have assisted everything from humans to molecules. In a sense, cooperation could be older than life itself."

Before you start arguing your belief that murder beats out cooperation, I will beat you to the punch with my favorite worst example: John B. Calhoun's experiment at the National Institute of Mental Health, published 34 years ago.

This was a colony of mice that was housed, fed, and allowed to breed unchecked. Soon there was general mayhem, with the strongest males defending their harems in their territories (the four corners of the cage) and left-over mice living in anarchy, complete with raping, killing, psychosis and eventually loss of sexual desire. Two and a half years later the colony was extinct, and we who read about it were anxious.

Humanity is overbreeding, too, so don't we also have ultimate extinction to worry about? Maybe.

But I think we have a choice. Fifty-six years ago the British neurophysiologist Sir Charles Sherrington said that throughout evolution the motto of the planet has been "more life."

Then he pointed out that human beings are the first product of the evolution of life to become critical of life. We can decide whether or not we should go on blindly getting more — of the planet's resources and of life's living space — or whether we have, as Sherrington said, "a duty toward life" because we are a part of nature beginning to understand itself.

I am reminded of something that Clifford Simak wrote 44 years ago: "...here was calm acceptance of the fact...that the life one held was a gift to be cherished rather than a right that one must wrest from other living things."

I will end my sermon on cooperation with the last two sentences in Sherrington's *Man On His Nature*:

"We have, because human, an inalienable prerogative of responsibility which we cannot devolve, no, not as once was thought, even upon the stars. We can share it only with each other."



Ben Bova is one of our most versatile sf writers. In addition to his short fiction, he writes wonderful novels and acclaimed non-fiction. His book, The Beauty of Light, *for example, was voted one of the best science books of the year by American Librarians' Association. He used to edit* Analog *and then* Omni, *winning the best editor Hugo for his work six times. He has also taught science fiction at Harvard and at the Hayden Planetarium in New York City.*

He returns to F&SF *with some humor. "The Great Moon Hoax" mixes the sf and detective genres, with several homages playing through its pages.*

The Great Moon Hoax or A Princess of Mars

By Ben Bova

I LEANED BACK IN MY DESK chair and just plain stared at the triangular screen.

"What do you call this thing?" I asked the Martian.

"It is an interociter," he said. He was half in the tank, as usual.

"Looks like a television set," I said.

"Its principles are akin to your television, but you will note that its picture is in full color, and you can scan events that were recorded in the past."

"We should be watching the President's speech," said Prof. Schmidt.

"Why? We know what he's going to say. He's going to tell Congress that he wants to send a man to the Moon before Nineteen-Seventy."

The Martian shuddered. His name was a collection of hisses and sputters that came out to something pretty close to Jazzbow. Anyhow, that's what I called him. He didn't seem to mind. Like me, he was a baseball fan.

We were sitting in my Culver City office, watching Ted Williams' last ballgame from last year. Now *there* was a baseball player. Best damned hitter since Ruth. And as independent as Harry Truman. Told the rest of the world to go to hell whenever he felt like it. I admired him for that. I had missed almost the whole season last year; the Martians had taken me on safari with them. They were always doing little favors like that for me; this interociter device was just the latest one.

"I still think we should be watching President Kennedy," Schmidt insisted.

"We can view it afterward, if you like," said Jazzbow, diplomatically. As I said, he had turned into quite a baseball fan and we both wanted to see the Splendid Splinter's final home run.

Jazzbow was a typical Martian. Some of the scientists still can't tell one from another, they look so much alike, but I guess that's because they're all cloned rather than conceived sexually. Mars is pretty damned dull that way, you know. Of course, most of the scientists aren't all that smart outside of their own fields of specialization. Take Einstein, for example. Terrific thinker. He believes if we all scrapped our atomic bombs the world would be at peace. Yah. Sure.

Anyway, Jazzbow is about four foot nine with dark leathery skin, kind of like a football that's been left out in the sun too long. The water from the tank made him look even darker, of course. Powerful barrel chest, but otherwise a real spidery build, arms and legs like pipestems. Webbed feet, evolved for walking on loose sand. Their hands have five fingers with opposable thumbs, just like ours, but the fingers have so many little bones in them that they're as flexible as an octopus' tentacles.

Martians would look really scary, I guess, if it weren't for their goofy faces. They've got big sorrowful limpid eyes with long feminine eyelashes, like a camel; their noses are splayed from one cheek to the other; and they've got these wide lipless mouths stretched into a permanent silly-looking grin, like a dolphin. No teeth at all. They eat nothing but liquids. Got long tongues, like some insects, which might be great for sex if they had any, but they don't and anyway they usually keep their tongues rolled up inside a special pouch in their cheeks so they don't startle any of us earthlings. How they talk with their tongues rolled up is beyond me.

Anyway, Jazzbow was half in the tank, as I said. He needed the water's buoyancy to make himself comfortable in earthly gravity. Otherwise he'd have to wear his exoskeleton suit and I couldn't see putting him through that just so we could have a face-to-face with Prof. Schmidt.

The professor was fidgeting unhappily in his chair. He didn't give a rat's ass about baseball, but at least he could tell Jazzbow from the other Martians. I guess it's because he was one of the special few who'd known the Martians ever since they had first crash-landed in New Mexico back in Forty-six.

Well, Williams socked his home run and the Fenway Park fans stood up and cheered for what seemed like an hour and he never did come out of the dugout to tip his cap for them. Good for him! I thought. His own man to the very end. That was his last time on a ball field as a player. I found I had tears in my eyes.

"*Now* can we see the President?" Schmidt asked, exasperated. Normally he looked like a young Santa Claus, round and red-cheeked, with a pale blond beard. He usually was a pretty jolly guy, but just now his responsibilities were starting to get the better of him.

Jazzbow snaked one long, limber arm out of the water and fiddled with the controls beneath the inverted triangle of the interociter's screen. JFK came on the screen in full color, in the middle of his speech to the joint session of Congress:

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth. I believe we should go to the Moon."

Jazzbow sank down in his water tank until only his big eyes showed and he started noisily blowing bubbles, his way of showing that he was upset.

Schmidt turned to me. "You're going to have to talk him out of it," he said flatly.

I had not voted for John Kennedy. I had instructed all of my employees to vote against him, although I imagine some of them disobeyed me out of some twisted sense of independence.

Now that he was President, though, I felt sorry for the kid. Eisenhower had let things slide pretty badly. The Commies were infiltrating the Middle East and of course they had put up the first artificial satellite and just a couple weeks ago had put the first man into space: Yuri something-

or-other. Meanwhile young Jack Kennedy had let that wacky plan for the reconquest of Cuba go through. I had told the CIA guys that they'd need strong air cover, but they went right ahead and hit the Bay of Pigs without even a Piper Cub over them. Fiasco.

So the new President was trying to get everybody's mind off all this crap by shooting for the Moon. Which would absolutely destroy everything we'd worked so hard to achieve since that first desperate Martian flight here some fifteen years earlier.

I knew that *somebody* had to talk the President out of this Moon business. And of all the handful of people who were in on the Martian secret, I guess that the only one who could really deal with the White House on an eye-to-eye level was me.

"Okay," I said to Schmidt. "But he's going to have to come out here. I'm not going to Washington."

IT WASN'T THAT EASY. The President of the United States doesn't come traipsing across the country to see an industrial magnate, no matter how many services the magnate has performed for his country. And my biggest service, of course, he didn't know anything about.

To make matters worse, while my people were talking to his people, I found out that the girl I was grooming for stardom turned out to be a snoop from the goddamned Internal Revenue Service. I had had my share of run-ins with the Feds, but using a beautiful starlet like Jean was a low blow even for them. A real crotch shot.

It was Jazzbow who found her out, of course.

Jean and I had been getting along very nicely indeed. She was tall and dark-haired and really lovely, with a sweet disposition and the kind of wide-eyed innocence that makes life worthwhile for a nasty old S.O.B. like me. And she loved it, couldn't get enough of whatever I wanted to give her. One of my hobbies was making movies; it was a great way to meet girls. Believe it or not, I'm really very shy. I'm more at home alone in a plane at twenty thousand feet than at some Hollywood cocktail party. But if you own a studio, the girls come flocking.

Okay, so Jean and I are getting along swell. Except that during the period when my staff was dickering with the White House staff, one

morning I wake up and she's sitting at the writing desk in my bedroom, going through my drawers. The desk drawers, that is.

I crack one eye open. There she is, naked as a Greek goddess and just as gorgeous, rummaging through the papers in my drawers. There's nothing in there, of course. I keep all my business papers in a germtight fireproof safe back at the office.

But she had found *something* that fascinated her. She was holding it in front of her, where I couldn't see what was in her hand, her head bent over it for what seemed like ten minutes, her dark hair cascading to her bare shoulders like a river of polished onyx.

Then she glanced up at the mirror and spotted me watching her.

"Do you always search your boyfriends' desks?" I asked. I was pretty pissed off, you know.

"What is this?" She turned and I saw she was holding one of my safari photos between her forefinger and thumb, like she didn't want to get fingerprints on it.

Damn! I thought. I should've stashed those away with my stag movies.

Jean got up and walked over to the bed. Nice as pie she sat on the edge and stuck the photo in front of my bleary eyes.

"What is this?" she asked again.

It was a photo of a Martian named Crunchy, the physicist George Gamow, James Dean and me in the dripping dark jungle in front of a brontosaurus I had shot. The Venusian version of a brontosaurus, that is. It looked like a small mountain of mottled leather. I was holding the stun rifle Crunchy had lent me for the safari.

I thought fast. "Oh, this. It's a still from a sci-fi film we started a few years ago. Never finished it, though. The special effects cost too much."

"That's James Dean, isn't it?"

I peered at the photo as if I was trying to remember something that wasn't terribly important. "Yeah, I think so. The kid wanted more money than I wanted to spend on the project. That's what killed it."

"He's been dead for five or six years."

"Has it been that long?" James Dean was alive and having the time of life working with the Martians on Venus. He had left his acting career and his life on Earth far behind him to do better work than the President's Peace Corps could even dream about.

"I didn't know he did a picture for you," she said, her voice dreamy, ethereal. Like every other woman her age she had a crush on James Dean. That's what drove the poor kid to Venus.

"He didn't," I snapped. "We couldn't agree on terms. Come on back to bed."

She did, but in the middle of it my damned private phone rang. Only five people on Earth knew that number and one of them wasn't human.

I groped for the phone. "This better be important," I said.

"The female you are with," said Jazzbow's hissing voice, "is a government agent."

Oh yeah, the Martians are long-distance telepaths, too.

So I took Jean for a drive out to the desert in my Bentley convertible. She loved the scenery, thought it was romantic. Or so she said. Me, I looked at that miserable dry Mohave scrubland and thought of what it could become: blossoming farms, spacious tracts of housing where people cooped up in the cities could raise their kids, glamorous shopping malls. But about all it was good for now was an Air Force base where guys like Chuck Yeager and Scott Crossfield flew the X-planes and the Martians landed their saucers every now and then. After dark, of course.

"Just look at that sunset," Jean said, almost breathless with excitement, maybe real, maybe pretended. She was an actress, after all.

I had to admit the sunset was pretty. Red and purple glowing brighter than Technicolor.

"Where are we going?" she kept on asking, a little more nervous each time.

"It's a surprise." I had to keep on going until it was good and dark. We had enough UFO sightings as it was, no sense taking a chance on somebody getting a really good look. Or even worse, a photograph.

The stars came out, big and bright and looking close enough to touch. I kept looking for one in particular to detach itself from the sky and land on the road beside us. All that stuff about saucers shining green rays on cars or planes and sucking them up inside themselves is sheer hooey. The Martians don't have anything like that. Wish they did.

Pretty soon I see it.

"Look!" says Jean. "A falling star!"

I didn't say anything, but a couple of minutes later the headlights pick up the saucer sitting there by the side of the road, still glowing a little from the heat of its reentry from orbit.

"Don't tell me you've driven me all the way out here to see another movie set," Jean said, sounding disappointed. "This isn't your big surprise, is it?"

"Not quite," I said, pulling up beside the saucer's spindly little ladder.

She was pretty pissed off. Even when two of the Martians came slithering down the ladder she still thought it was some kind of a movie stunt. They had to move pretty slow and awkwardly because of the gravity; made me think of the monster movies we made. Jean was definitely not impressed.

"Honestly, Howard, I don't see why — "

Then one of the Martians put its snake-fingered hands on her and she gave a yelp and did what any well-trained movie starlet would do. She fainted.

Jazzbow wasn't in the ship, of course. The Martians wouldn't risk a landing in Culver City to pick him up, not even at night. Nobody but Prof. Schmidt and me knew he was in my office suite there. And the other Martians, of course.

So I got Jazzbow on the ship's interociter while his fellow Martians draped the unconscious Jean on one of their couches. Her skirt rucked up nicely, showing off her legs to good advantage.

"They're not going to hurt her any, are they?" I asked Jazzbow.

"Of course not," his image answered from the inverted triangular screen. "I thought you knew us better than that."

"Yeah, I know. You can't hurt a fly. But still, she's just a kid..."

"They're merely probing her mind to see how much she actually knows. It will only take a few minutes."

I won't go into all the details. The Martians are extremely sensitive about their dealings with other living creatures. Not hurt a fly? Hell, they'd make the Dalai Lama look like a bloodthirsty maniac.

Very gently, like a mother caressing her sleeping baby, three of them touched her face and forehead with those tentacle-like fingers. Probing her mind. Some writer got wind of the technique second- or third-hand and

used it on television a few years later. Called it a Velcro mind-melt or something like that.

"We have for you," the ship's science officer told me, "good news and bad news."

His name sounded kind of like Snitch. Properly speaking, every Martian is an "it," not a "him" or a "her." But I always thought of them as males.

"The good news," Snitch said to me, "is that this female knew nothing of our existence. She hadn't the faintest suspicion that Martians exist or that you are dealing with them."

"Well, she does now," I grumbled.

"The bad news," he went on, with that silly grin spread across his puss, "is that she is acting as an undercover agent for your Internal Revenue Service — while she's between acting jobs."

Aw hell.

I talked it over with Jazzbow. Then he talked in Martian with Snitch. Then all three of us talked together. We had evolved a Standard Operating Procedure for situations like this, when somebody stumbled onto our secret. I didn't much like the idea of using it on Jean, but there wasn't much else we could do.

So, reluctantly, I agreed. "Just be damned careful with her," I insisted. "She's not some hick cop who's been startled out of his snooze by one of your cockamamie malfunctioning saucers."

Their saucers were actually pretty reliable, but every once in a while the atmospheric turbulence at low altitude would get them into trouble. Most of the sightings happened when the damned things wobbled too close to the ground.

Jazzbow and Snitch promised they'd be extra-special careful.

Very gently, the Martians selectively erased Jean's memory so that all she remembered the next morning, when she woke up a half a mile from a Mohave gas station, was that she had been abducted by aliens from another world and taken aboard a flying saucer.

The authorities wanted to put her in a nut house, of course. But I sent a squad of lawyers to spring her, since she was under contract to my movie studio. The studio assumed responsibility for her, and my lawyers assured the authorities that she was about to star in a major motion picture. The

yokels figured it had all been a publicity stunt and turned her loose. I actually did put her into a couple of starring roles, which ended her career with the IRS, although I figured that not even the Feds would have had anything to do with Jean after the tabloids headlined her story about being abducted by flying saucer aliens. I took good care of her, though. I even married her, eventually. That's what comes from hanging around with Martians.

See, the Martians have a *very* high ethical standard of conduct. They cannot willingly hurt anybody or anything. Wouldn't step on an ant. It's led to some pretty near scrapes for us, though. Every now and then somebody stumbles onto them and the whole secret's in jeopardy. They could wipe the person's brain clean, but that would turn the poor sucker into a zombie. So they selectively erase only the smallest possible part of the sucker's memory.

And they always leave the memory of being taken into a flying saucer. They tell me they have to. That's part of their moral code, too. They're constantly testing us — the whole human race, that is — to see if we're ready to receive alien visitors from another world. And to date, the human race as a whole has consistently flunked every test.

Sure, a handful of very special people know about them. I'm pretty damned proud to be among that handful, let me tell you. But the rest of the human race, the man in the street, the news reporters and preachers and even the average university professor — they either ridicule the very idea that there could be any kind of life at all on another world or they get scared to death of the possibility. Take a look at the movies we make!

"Your people are sadly xenophobic," Jazzbow told me more than once, his big liquid eyes looking melancholy despite that dumbbell clown's grin splitting his face.

I remembered Orson Welles' broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* back in Thirty-eight. People got hysterical when they thought Martians had landed in New Jersey, although why anybody would want to invade New Jersey is beyond me. Here I had real Martians zipping all over the place and they were gentle as butterflies. But no one would believe that; the average guy would blast away with his twelve-gauge first and ask where they came from afterward.

So I had to convince the President that if he sent astronauts to the Moon, it would have catastrophic results.

Well, my people and Kennedy's people finally got the details ironed out and we agreed to meet at Edwards Air Force Base, out in the Mohave. Totally secret meeting. JFK was giving a speech in LA that evening at the Beverly Wilshire. I sent a company helicopter to pick him up there and fly him over to Edwards. Just him and two of his aides. Not even his Secret Service bodyguards; he didn't care much for having those guys lurking around him, anyway. Cut down on his love life too much.

We met in Hangar Nine, the place where the first Martian crew was stashed back in Forty-six, pretty battered from their crash landing. That's when I first found out about them. I was asked by Prof. Schmidt, who looked like a very agitated young Santa Claus back then, to truck in as many refrigeration units as my company could lay its hands on. Schmidt wanted to keep the Martians comfortable, and since their planet is so cold he figured they needed mucho refrigeration. That was before he found out that the Martians spend about half their energy budget at home just trying to stay reasonably warm. They loved southern California! Especially the swimming pools.

Anyway, there I am waiting for the President in good old Hangar Nine, which had been so Top Secret since Forty-six that not even the base commander's been allowed inside. We'd partitioned it and decked it out with nice furniture and all the modern conveniences. I noticed that Jazzbow had recently had an interociter installed. Inside the main living area we had put up a big water tank for Jazzbow and his fellow Martians, of course. The place kind of resembled a movie set: nice modern furnishings, but if you looked past the ten-foot-high partitions that served as walls you saw the bare metal support beams crisscrossing up in the shadows of the ceiling.

Jazzbow came in from Culver City in the same limo that brought Prof. Schmidt. As soon as he got into the hanger he unhooked his exoskeleton and dived into the water tank. Schmidt started pacing nervously back and forth on the Persian carpeting I had put in. He was really wound up tight: letting the President in on this secret was an enormous risk. Not for us so much as for the Martians.

It was just about midnight when we heard the throbbing motor sound of a helicopter in the distance. I walked out into the open and saw the stars glittering like diamonds all across the desert sky. How many of them are inhabited? I wondered. How many critters out there are looking at our Sun and wondering if there's any intelligent life there?

Is there any intelligent life in the White House? That was the big question, far as I was concerned.

Jack Kennedy looked tired. No, worse than that, he looked troubled. Beaten down. Like a man who had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Which he did. Elected by a paper-thin majority, he was having hell's own time getting Congress to vote for his programs. Tax relief, increased defense spending, civil rights — they were all dead in the water, stymied by a Congress that wouldn't do spit for him. And now I was going to pile another ton and a half on top of all that.

"Mr. President," I said as he walked through the chilly desert night from the helicopter toward the hangar door. I sort of stood at attention: for the office, not the man, you understand. Remember, I voted for Nixon.

He nodded at me and made a weary smile and stuck out his hand the way every politician does. I let him shake my hand, making a mental note to excuse myself and go to the washroom as soon as decently possible.

As we had agreed, he left his two aides at the hangar door and accompanied me inside all by himself. He kind of shuddered.

"It's cold out there, isn't it?" he said.

He was wearing a summer-weight suit. I had an old windbreaker over my shirt and slacks.

"We've got the heat going inside," I said, gesturing him through the door in the first partition. I led him into the living area and to the big carpeted central room where the water tank was. Schmidt followed behind us so close I could almost feel his breath on my neck. It gave me that crawly feeling I get when I realize how many millions of germs are floating through the air all the time.

"Odd place for a swimming tank," the President said as soon as we entered the central room.

"It's not as odd as you think," I said. Jazzbow had ducked low, out of sight for the time being.

My people had arranged two big sofas and a scattering of comfortable armchairs around a coffee table on which they had set up a fair-sized bar. Bottles of every description, even champagne in its own ice bucket.

"What'll you have?" I asked. We had decided that, with just the three of us humans present, I would be the bartender.

Both the President and Schmidt asked for scotch. I made the drinks big, knowing they would both need them.

"Now what's this all about?" Kennedy asked after his first sip of the booze. "Why all this secrecy and urgency?"

I turned to Schmidt, but he seemed to be petrified. So absolutely frozen that he couldn't even open his mouth or pick up his drink. He just stared at the President, overwhelmed by the enormity of what we had to do.

So I said, "Mr. President, you have to stop this Moon program."

He blinked his baggy eyes. Then he grinned. "Do I?"

"Yessir."

"Why?"

"Because it will hurt the Martians."

"The Martians, you said?"

"That's right. The Martians," I repeated.

Kennedy took another sip of scotch, then put his glass down on the coffee table. "Mr. Hughes, I had heard that you'd gone off the deep end, that you've become a recluse and something of a mental case — "

Schmidt snapped out of his funk. "Mr. President, he's telling you the truth. There are Martians."

Kennedy gave him a "who are you trying to kid" look. "Professor Schmidt, I know you're a highly respected astronomer, but if you expect me to believe there are living creatures on Mars you're going to have to show me some evidence."

On that cue, Jazzbow came slithering out of the water tank. The President's eyes goggled as old Jazzie made his painful way, dripping on the rug, to one of the armchairs and half collapsed into it.

"Mr. President, " I said, "may I introduce Jazzbow of Mars. Jazzbow, President Kennedy."

The President just kept on staring. Jazzbow extended his right hand, that perpetual clown's grin smeared across his face. With his jaw hanging open, Kennedy took Jazzbow's hand in his. And flinched.

"I assure you, " Jazzbow said, not letting go of the President's hand, "that I am truly from Mars."

Kennedy nodded. He believed it. He had to. Martians can make you see the truth of things. Goes with their telepathic abilities, I guess.

Schmidt explained the situation. How the Martians had built their canals once they realized that their world was dying. How they tried to bring water from the polar ice caps to their cities and farm lands. It worked, for a few centuries, but eventually even that wasn't enough to save the Martians from slow but certain extinction.

They were great engineers, great thinkers. Their technology was roughly a century or so ahead of ours. They had invented the electric light bulb, for example, during the time of our French and Indian War.

By the time they realized that Mars was going to dry up and wither away despite all their efforts, they had developed a rudimentary form of space flight. Desperate, they thought that maybe they could bring natural resources from other worlds in the solar system to revive their dying planet. They knew that Venus was, beneath its clouds, a teeming Mesozoic jungle. Plenty of water there, if they could cart it back to Mars.

They couldn't. Their first attempts at space flight ended in disasters. Of the first five saucers they sent toward Venus, three of them blew up on takeoff, one veered off course and was never heard from again, and the fifth crash-landed in New Mexico — which is a helluva long way from Venus.

Fortunately, their saucer crash-landed near a small astronomical station in the desert. A young graduate student — who eventually became Prof. Schmidt — was the first to find them. The Martians inside the saucer were pretty banged up, but three of them were still alive. Even more fortunately, we had something that the Martians desperately needed: the raw materials and manufacturing capabilities to mass-produce flying saucers for them. That's where I had come in, as a tycoon of the aviation industry.

President Kennedy found his voice. "Do you mean to tell me that the existence of Martians — living, breathing, intelligent Martians — has been kept a secret since Nineteen Forty-six? More than fifteen years?"

"It's been touch and go on several occasions," Schmidt said. "But, yes, we've managed to keep the secret pretty well."

"Pretty well?" Kennedy seemed disturbed, agitated. "The Central Intelligence Agency doesn't know anything about this, for Christ's sake!"

Then he caught himself, and added, "Or, if they do, they haven't told me about it."

"We have tried very hard to keep this a secret from all the politicians of every stripe," Schmidt said.

"I can see not telling Eisenhower," said the President. "Probably would've given Ike a fatal heart attack." He grinned. "I wonder what Harry Truman would've done with the information."

"We were tempted to tell President Truman, but — "

"That's all water over the dam," I said, trying to get them back onto the subject. "We're here to get you to call off this Project Apollo business."

"But why?" asked the President. "We could use Martian spacecraft and plant the American flag on the Moon tomorrow morning!"

"No," whispered Jazzbow. Schmidt and I knew that when a Martian whispers, it's a sign that he's scared shitless.

"Why not?" Kennedy snapped.

"Because you'll destroy the Martians," said Schmidt, with real iron in his voice.

"I don't understand."

Jazzbow turned those big luminous eyes on the President. "May I explain it to you...the Martian way?"

I'll say this for Jack Kennedy. The boy had guts. It was obvious that the basic human xenophobia was strong inside him. When Jazzbow had first touched his hand Kennedy had almost jumped out of his skin. But he met the Martian's gaze and, not knowing what would come next, solemnly nodded his acceptance.

Jazzbow reached out his snaky arm toward Kennedy's face. I saw beads of sweat break out on the President's brow but he sat still and let the Martian's tentacle-like fingers touch his forehead and temple.

It was like jumping a car battery. Thoughts flowed from Jazzbow's brain into Kennedy's. I knew what those thoughts were.

It had to do with the Martians' moral sense. The average Martian has an ethical quotient about equal to St. Francis of Assisi. That's the *average* Martian. While they're only a century or so ahead of us technologically, they're light-years ahead of us morally, socially, ethically. There hasn't been a war on Mars in more than a thousand years. There hasn't even been a case of petty theft in centuries. You can walk the avenues of their

beautiful, gleaming cities at any time of the day or night in complete safety. And since their planet is so desperately near absolute depletion, they just about worship the smallest blade of grass.

If our brawling, battling human nations discovered the fragile, gentle Martian culture there would be a catastrophe. The Martians would be swarmed under, shattered, dissolved by a tide of politicians, industrialists, real estate developers, evangelists wanting to save their souls, drifters, grifters, con men, thieves petty and grand. To say nothing of military officers driven by xenophobia. It would make the Spanish Conquest of the Americas look like a Boy Scout Jamboree.

I could see from the look in Kennedy's eyes that he was getting the message. "*We* would destroy *your* culture?" he asked.

Jazzbow had learned the human way of nodding. "You would not merely destroy our culture, Mr. President. You would kill us. We would die, all of us, very quickly."

"But you have the superior technology..."

"We could never use it against you," said Jazzbow. "We would lie down and die rather than deliberately take the life of a paramecium."

"Oh."

Schmidt spoke up. "So you see, Mr. President, why this Moon project has got to be called off. We can't allow the human race *en masse* to learn of the Martians' existence."

"I understand," he murmured.

Schmidt breathed out a heavy sigh of relief. Too soon.

"But I can't stop the Apollo project."

"Can't?" Schmidt gasped.

"Why not?" I asked.

Looking utterly miserable, Kennedy told us, "It would mean the end of my administration. For all practical purposes, at least."

"I don't see — "

"I haven't been able to get a thing through Congress except the Moon project. They're stiffing me on everything else: my economics package, my defense build-up, civil rights, welfare — everything except the Moon program has been stopped dead in Congress. If I give up on the Moon I might as well resign the presidency."

"You are not happy in your work," said Jazzbow.

"No, I'm not," Kennedy admitted, in a low voice. "I never wanted to go into politics. It was my father's idea. Especially after my older brother got killed in the war."

A dismal, gloomy silence descended on us.

"It's all been a sham," the President muttered. "My marriage is a mess, my presidency is a farce, I'm in love with a woman who's married to another man — I wish I could just disappear from the face of the Earth."

Which, of course, is exactly what we arranged for him.

IT WAS TRICKY, believe me. We had to get his blonde *inamorata* to disappear, which wasn't easy, since she was in the public eye just about as much as the President. Then we had to fake his own assassination, so we could get him safely out of the way. At first he was pretty reluctant about it all, but then the Berlin Wall went up and the media blamed him for it and he agreed that he wanted out —permanently. We were all set to pull it off but the Cuban Missile Crisis hit the fan and we had to put everything on hold for more than a month. By the time we had calmed that mess down he was more than ready to leave this Earth. So we arranged the thing for Dallas.

We didn't dare tell Lyndon Johnson about the Martians, of course. He would've wanted to go to Mars and annex the whole damned planet. To Texas, most likely. And we didn't have to tell Nixon; he was happy to kill the Apollo program — after taking as much credit for the first lunar landing as the media would give him.

The toughest part was hoodwinking the astronomers and planetary scientists and the engineers who built spacecraft probes of the planets. It took all of Schmidt's ingenuity and the Martians' technical skills to get the various *Mariner* and *Pioneer* probes jiggered so that they would show a barren dry Venus devastated by a runaway greenhouse effect instead of the lush Mesozoic jungle that really exists beneath those clouds. I had to pull every string I knew, behind the scenes, to get the geniuses at JPL to send their two *Viking* landers to the Martian equivalents of Death Valley and the Atacama Desert in Chile. They missed the cities and the canals completely.

Schmidt used his international connections too. I didn't much like working with Commies, but I've got to admit the two Russians scientists I met were okay guys.

And it worked. Sightings of the canals on Mars went down to zero once our faked *Mariner 6* pictures were published. Astronomy students looking at Mars for the first time through a telescope thought they were victims of eyestrain! They *knew* there were no canals there, so they didn't dare claim they saw any.

So that's how we got to the Moon and then stopped going. We set up the Apollo program so that a small number of Americans could plant the flag and their footprints on the Moon and then forget about it. The Martians studiously avoided the whole area during the four years that we were sending missions up there. It all worked out very well, if I say so myself.

I worked harder than I ever had before in my life to get the media to downplay the space program, make it a dull, no-news affair. The man in the street, the average xenophobic Joe Six-Pack forgot about the glories of space exploration soon enough. It tore at my guts to do it, but that's what had to be done.

So now we're using the resources of the planet Venus to replenish Mars. Schmidt has a tiny group of astronomers who've been hiding the facts of the solar system from the rest of the profession since the late Forties. With the Martians' help they're continuing to fake the pictures and data sent from NASA's space probes.

The rest of the world thinks that Mars is a barren lifeless desert and Venus is a bone-dry hothouse beneath its perpetual cloud cover and space in general is pretty much of a bore. Meanwhile, with the help of Jazzbow and a few other Martians, we've started an environmental movement on Earth. Maybe if we can get human beings to see their own planet as a living entity, to think of the other animals and plants on our own planet as fellow residents of this spaceship Earth rather than resources to be killed or exploited — maybe then we can start to reduce the basic xenophobia in the human psyche.

I won't live long enough to see the human race embrace the Martians as brothers. It will take generations, centuries, before we grow to their level of morality. But maybe we're on the right track now. I hope so.

I keep thinking of what Jack Kennedy said when he finally agreed to rig project Apollo the way we did, and to arrange his own and his girlfriend's demises.

"'It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done,'" he quoted.

Thinking of him and Marilyn shacked up in a honeymoon suite on Mars, I realized that the remainder of the quote would have been totally inappropriate: "it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known."

But what the hell, who am I to talk? I've fallen in love for the first time. Yeah, I know. I've been married several times but this time it's real and I'm going to spend the rest of my life on a tropical island with her, just the two of us alone, far from the madding crowd.

Well, maybe not the whole rest of my life. The Martians know a lot more about medicine than we do. Maybe we'll leave this Pacific island where the Martians found her and go off to Mars and live a couple of centuries or so. I think Amelia would like that.

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Michael Coney's story "Werewolves in Sheep's Clothing" is also a bit lighthearted. It's set in the same location as his popular January, 1994 cover story, "Tea and Hamsters." ("Tea and Hamsters" was also on the 1996 final Nebula ballot for best novelette, opposite Dale Bailey. Another F&SF story, "Solitude," by Ursula Le Guin won that category.)

About this story, Michael writes, "I wanted to write another story about Mrs. Masterson and Foss Creek...and I enjoy writing about sheep because of their essential craziness. It all came together here."

Werewolves in Sheep's Clothing

By Michael Coney

THE CHOTH PAID A BRIEF visit to the planet Earth in 593 BC, and left behind nothing but a memory.

Over two thousand years later a few Choth encountered humans for the second time, knocking on the door (so to speak) of Sol Station 2 and asking for refugee status.

"Kick them back into Space and let them rot!" shouted Mrs. Rachel Masterson.

"I can't just kick them back," objected her father, commander of the Station, "that would be a racist thing to do. We must welcome them as we would welcome our own kind. Anyway, they're humanoid, more or less."

Mrs. Masterson eyed her father keenly. If there was one person in the Universe she respected, it was this tall old man. In fact he was the *only* person in the Universe she respected. But.... Had the years taken their toll at last? After all, he was ninety-three. Was that magnificent judgment becoming impaired? Was that a bead of drool at the corner of those patrician lips?

"The Choth will bear watching, Father," was all she said.

The Choth were indeed a beleaguered race. On their home world they were preyed upon by gigantic disk-shaped predators swooping down from the sky. The predators required their sun's warmth, so they maintained a station on the sunny side of their world which revolved on its axis once per standard month. The sight of the swooping monthly predators triggered a monthly savagery in the Choth, enabling them to defend themselves. The fiercest Choth survived, but it was a tough life, and once they had mastered space travel they left for more congenial worlds.

"We are here today," announced Admiral Masterson to the assembled population one standard week later, "to decide an important issue: whether to allow our friends the Choth to proceed to Earth as refugees, or whether to take the barbaric step of turning them away to die in the cold reaches of space. We are here to prove whether, as humans, we can show common humanity to this handful of unfortunates. I ask you to press the button before each of you. The green button signifies the Choth may become part of our great family on Earth, the red button condemns them to certain death."

A thousand fingers reached out; a thousand buttons were pressed.

And behind the Admiral, the giant monitor screen turned red.

The forty-seven Choth, who had been showing signs of restlessness for some hours with occasional outbursts of snarling and snapping, rose from their seats with a single howl of fury and fell upon their human hosts. Admiral Masterson withdrew to summon the security forces. As the battle mounted, he was followed by Rachel Masterson and her husband Wally. The three met with the Chief of Security, Brant Holstein, in his britanium-lined office while the battle raged through the corridors of Sol Station 2.

"Close all the airtight bulkheads, Holstein," barked the Admiral. "That will reduce the Station to controllable sectors. Then deploy your men around the perimeter of the main assembly hall. Ah!" he cried, drawing his laser pistol as he caught sight of movement near the door. "Got you, you bastard!"

They were his last words. He fired at his own reflection in the britanium wall, drilled a hole through his own heart and fell to the deck, smoking.

"I assume command!" shouted Mrs. Masterson, quick-witted as ever. "Holstein, obey the late Admiral's orders!"

Brant Holstein, laced with ox genes, big and stolid in his black uniform, said, "If I close the airtight bulkheads it'll strand my forces all over the Station. They won't be able to surround the assembly hall. If the Admiral had allowed my people to attend the meeting we wouldn't have been in this predicament. But no, we were excluded. We have animal genes so he thinks we are less than human, and not entitled to a vote. And you call this a democracy."

Mrs. Masterson, who never believed in democracy anyway, drew her pistol. "Summary execution is the penalty for mutiny, I believe."

Her husband spoke for the first time. "For God's sake, Rachel!"

"Silence, Wally. You stay out of this. Now, Holstein, will you obey my orders or not?"

"You are not in command, Mrs. Masterson. Vice-Admiral Parker is next in line."

"Parker is a fool. Parker is — "

Her further views on the Vice-Admiral were destined to remain unvoiced, however. A number of anxious Security people burst into the office seeking orders, only to find their chief being held at gunpoint.

Mrs. Masterson was quickly disarmed and took no further part in the battle of Sol Station 2.

Five years later, a fine spring morning in Foss Creek, Earth.

The sun was gilding Mrs. Masterson's little living room, reflecting prettily from the glass-fronted bookcase, the copper fire-irons, the silver coffee service and the steel components of the dismantled Heckler & Koch semi-automatic rifle.

Megan Jenkins was eyeing the weapon nervously. "Is this one of your collection?" she inquired.

Mrs. Masterson's forbidding features softened as she oiled the breech. "A splendid weapon. Nine millimeter, fifteen rounds capacity, roller locked, delayed blowback. A work of art." Swiftly she assembled it. "Here, get the feel of it."

"I'd rather not, really, Rachel. Uh, do you have many more of these things?"

Mrs. Masterson was positively beaming, a rare sight. "Thirty-three antique firearms plus ammunition, a box or two of grenades, a few tear-gas canisters, that kind of thing. I have a couple of modern weapons too; laser rifles. But guess what my favorite of all is. This will make you laugh, Megan. The good old-fashioned twelve-bore shotgun!"

"Really?"

"Webley & Scott Model 700. A kick like a mule — a real man's gun."

"But tear-gas?"

"Excellent for putting down insurrection."

"I hardly think we're likely to get insurrection in Foss Creek, Rachel. What's our population, eighty-three?"

"One thing life has taught me," said the old lady darkly, "never underestimate the violent potential of a mob. Eighty-three? It took less than fifty to mount the Choth rebellion on Sol Station 2 when I was there. Take this afternoon's soccer game, for example. The Contemptibles are playing Lupworth United. City folk will be flocking here to watch; you know, a breath of fresh air, a spot of local color and a leavening of hooliganism. And mark my words, Megan, I'll be ready for it! As Club Manager I'm responsible for law and order at the game. The time may come when we'll be glad of a tear-gas canister or two!"

Megan finished her coffee and left with an uneasy premonition.

THE CITY DWELLERS at Yamton Dome looked forward to their Saturday afternoons in the country. A chance to get into the fresh air and the primitive byways and villages which, they told themselves, hadn't changed in a thousand years. And in a way they were right, because strict local bylaws forbade construction work, tree cutting, or anything else that might sully the myth. Truth was, the countryside had become one big tourist trap and the inhabitants of Foss Creek were almost totally dependent on tourism for their income. That, and company pensions.

The afternoon continued as fine as the morning. On such a day there were few more potent tourist attractions than the fine and ancient sport of village soccer, when muscular yokels kicked a ball and one another around a grassy field redolent of sheep dung; such a contrast to the clean and clinical non-violence of dome life.

Today's game was of particular significance. Foss Creek Contemptibles had fought their way through to the Final of the Southwestern Knockout Cup, to be played in five weeks time. Lupworth United had done likewise. So the game, although a mere league event, could be regarded as a dress rehearsal for the Cup Final.

By noon the management of the Contemptibles were gathered in the bar of Ye Olde Shippe Inne to discuss strategy under the leadership of Mrs. Masterson.

The old lady scowled around at her committee. There was Gervaise Todd-Mortimer, the local veterinarian, sipping at a small gin-and-orange, the drink of the weakling. His son Bill, team captain and goalkeeper, long on virility but short on intellect, drinking beer, the worst thing before a game. And Anna Tyler the sociologist who had so often used soccer as a metaphor for Life that she was now unable to distinguish between the two, guzzling some herbal concoction. Losers all — except possibly for young Bill, for whom she had a soft spot — bequeathed to Mrs. Masterson by the previous manager whom the old lady had deposed recently in a lightning coup.

Now, as a fresh hand on the helm, she intended to take time to assess the quality of her crew, evaluating them carefully before kicking them the hell out and co-opting more compliant followers. So her father the Admiral had taught her, the wise old fellow.

"United are strong on teamwork," Gervaise Todd-Mortimer was saying. "That's how they reached the Cup Final. They have no stars. Just good all-round combination play. Pretty to watch."

"I'll have a word with Jim Bullock before the kick-off," said Bill Todd-Mortimer. "He'll chop a few of them down to size."

"I don't expect that kind of talk from a son of mine," said his father reprovingly. "We must remember what Foss Creek stands for. We play hard, but we play fair."

"Like a pack of goddamned wolves, Lupworth United are," muttered Bill rebelliously. "Always chasing, always winning the loose ball, and they seem to know where their own men are by some kind of instinct. It's scary. I'm not looking forward to this afternoon's game one little bit. We're on to a loser here, Dad. Jim could be our only chance."

Anna Tyler spoke up diffidently. "Perhaps I should address the team

before the kick-off. Remind them that the opposition are only human, talk about the honor of Foss Creek being at stake, that kind of thing."

Mrs. Masterson felt herself flush with outrage. The nerve of the woman! "Might I remind you as Club Manager that the pre-game pep talk is my responsibility!"

"I beg your pardon. I was just trying to help. A good win this afternoon would be an enormous psychological boost, with the Cup Final coming up."

What kind of a sociologist was the woman, for God's sake? It was time to teach these buffoons a little strategy. "Allow me to ask you which is more important: today's little village scramble, or the upcoming Cup Final? Doesn't it occur to you that a solid defeat this afternoon might work to our advantage, lulling Lupworth into a false sense of security? This, unless I am very much mistaken," she declared, "is a game to be lost!"

A surprised silence ensued as they took this in. The effete Todd-Mortimer, however, was slow to grasp the concept, as one might expect. Inbreeding, of course.

"You're suggesting...." His eyebrows had disappeared into his hairline so that he looked like the victim of a small but fiery explosion, "You're suggesting we throw the game?"

"What I actually said was that it is a game to be lost."

"We *can't* throw the game! It's...." He searched for an appropriate expression of his horror. "It's just not cricket!"

"Throwing, as such, may not be necessary if your son's assessment of our chances can be trusted. Win or lose, it matters little in the broader picture of the full season. I am using this afternoon's event as a test-bed for our Cup Final strategy." She stood. "I declare this meeting closed. Let us adjourn to the stadium of Foss Creek Contemptibles."

The stadium consisted of a large pasture with minimal changing facilities and a few benches for spectators, on the crest of the hill above Foss Creek village. When the committee arrived in Mrs. Masterson's battered buggy the home team were busy erecting the goal posts. Meanwhile Carl Steffen's prize flock of Dorset Down ewes were grazing on the playing surface and volunteers were preparing refreshments and manning the primitive turnstiles. A trickle of spectators were arriving.

"Get those sheep off the pitch!" roared Mrs. Masterson.

"We'll handle it." It was Dexter Brood, manager of Lupworth United, climbing from the team copter. Mrs. Masterson had met him once before and, not surprisingly, conceived an instant dislike of the man. There was something coarse about Brood, something not quite trustworthy, an indefinable lack of caliber that she, as a Space Admiral's daughter, was well qualified to judge. It had nothing to do with his widow's peak, flared nostrils and permanently unshaven appearance.

She was about to tell him to mind his own damned business when, with shouts of enthusiasm, Lupworth United followed him out of the copter and raced onto the pitch. The sheep began to scurry toward the gate in the distant hedge.

"You wanted to see me, Mrs. Masterson?" Jim Bullock approached, wearing the Contemptibles' new colors of black and yellow hoops. The colors were Anna Tyler's idea. She felt that they would remind the opposition, subconsciously, of a swarm of angry wasps, causing them to hold back on crucial tackles.

"Yes. A word in your ear, Jim." She drew him around the side of the locker rooms.

"By Jesus, what's going on here?" She heard the angry tones of Carl Steffen and turned back. "Those are in-lamb ewes! Why are you chasing them all over hell's half acre? Come back here, you young jackasses!"

The task of clearing the field had escalated in a curious manner. The Lupworth United team appeared to have gone berserk, pursuing the sheep vigorously in all directions. Several players had succeeded in running their woolly prey down and hurling them to the ground. At least half a dozen grim tussles between footballer and ewe were taking place.

"Men!" barked Brood. "Stop that!" He turned to Steffen apologetically. "They can get a bit carried away, but they're good men at heart."

"But what the hell are they trying to do?"

"Farm boys, you know, salt of the earth. Never miss a chance to throw a sheep."

"It's steers you throw," snapped Steffen. "Not sheep. Any fool knows that. Now get your men back here, right now!"

Brood threw back his head and uttered a peculiar ululating cry. The distant figures turned. For a moment they remained still, then they came loping toward Brood. The sheep dashed through the open gate and made

for the fence at the far end, putting as much ground between themselves and Lupworth United as was geographically possible. The players gathered around Brood, panting, mouths hanging open, awaiting orders.

"Get changed," he said shortly.

Bill Todd-Mortimer joined Mrs. Masterson and Jim Bullock.

"There's something really weird about those guys," he said.

BILL WAS SERIOUSLY concerned about Lupworth United. He'd been on a spying expedition the previous week and had seen them beat Merton Town six-nil. It had been an awe-inspiring performance. Merton had been swept aside by uncanny team-play and ruthless finishing, to the extent that Bill had wondered if maybe Lupworth had been genetically enhanced.

Genetic enhancing was the bane of big-league soccer those days, and random DNA testing was carried out before big matches to ensure that an unusually agile goalkeeper, for instance, was not part gibbon. Bill was reasonably sure, however, that there were no gibbons in Lupworth United. Their wrists did not protrude excessively from their sleeves.

After a defeatist team discussion in the locker room, followed by a hectoring speech from Mrs. Masterson, he led the Foss Creek Contemptibles onto the field to the applause of the home crowd. The team kicked the ball about aimlessly for a few moments, waiting for Lupworth who were still in their locker room, howling in unison. Eventually they emerged and the game commenced.

It was not a game Bill cared to remember. The Lupworth goalkeeper sustained a broken leg in a collision with Jim Bullock and was replaced by Dexter Brood himself, but the referee banished Jim from the game, leaving the Contemptibles one man short. Thereafter United dominated the game. It was a repetition of their victory over Merton Town: uncanny combination play with accurate passing and almost prescient running of the ball.

After the half-time break, which Lupworth United spent howling in their locker room, the second half followed the pattern of the first. Already three goals down and reduced to ten men, the Contemptibles showed no sign of recovery and United goals came with almost monotonous regular-

ity. Only the courage of Bill Todd-Mortimer in goal was preventing a basketball score. Time and again he threw himself at the feet of onrushing strikers until the premonition grew within him that, any moment now, his luck would run out and he would get himself killed. But he was captain, by God, and his father was watching, not to mention Janet Remmers, all tits and legs. It was no time for quitting.

Five minutes from the final whistle the ball rolled toward the left touchline. The Lupworth striker had anticipated the pass and gathered it neatly with the outside of his right foot, stroking the ball forward. He feinted to the right, then took the ball past the outstretched leg of a defender.

Bill's premonition became a certainty. This was it.

The striker cut in toward goal, glancing up. Two, three maroon Lupworth shirts were closing in for the kill. Bill's defenders were nowhere. The striker was clearly debating chipping the ball across to his waiting team-mates; then unexpectedly he decided to go it alone. Bill advanced in a scuttling crouch to narrow the angle, arms outstretched, despairing. Tourism was a mug's game. Tomorrow he'd make for Yamton, get a job under the clean umbrella of the dome. Something behind a desk. Something unconnected with boots and kicking.

The striker's right foot struck the ball a meaty thump, aiming to curl it inside the far post. Bill flung himself up and back, and got the fingertips of his left hand to the ball — just a touch, but enough to divert it harmlessly over the crossbar.

The applause faded and a stillness settled over the ground. The ball had gone — but the maroon shirts were still closing in on Bill. He jumped to his feet, fear clutching at his heart. Four Lupworth players surrounded him, legs flexed like crouching animals. Their mouths hung open, panting, and it seemed to Bill that their tongues lolled out over unnaturally sharp teeth. They wore hungry grins.

Now it was time for quitting. With a yell of fright he burst through the Lupworth men and fled.

Anna Tyler pushed open the door of the Foss Creek locker room. It was her duty, following a defeat, to offer grief counseling.

Naked figures stood all around in attitudes of dejection. "Jeez, we really struck out today," said one.

"What a goddamned catastrophe! Eleven-nothing! I feel ashamed, you know that?"

"Let's go with that thought," Anna urged.

"What kind of a chance do we stand in the Cup Final, for Pete's sake?" asked another. Although it was meant as a rhetorical question, it drew several responses, all negative.

"We're gonna get creamed!"

"Go with it!" exhorted Anna. "Let it all out!"

"We're a bunch of dorks!" someone contributed tearfully.

"It's all Jim's fault!" came an accusing whine. "Getting himself sent off, the pisspot!"

"Yeah! What chance did we have with ten men!"

Anna was pleased. "That's good. That's healthy and normal. That's what we need, a scapegoat."

Jim Bullock, immensely naked, loomed up angrily. "Let's get this straight, I did what I was told! I was told to take out their goalie and that's what I did. Was it my fault the ref saw me do it?" He glowered around, huge fists bunched. "Which of you called me a pisspot? Jeez, I'm gonna smash your face in, whoever the hell you are!"

"Not now, Jim," said Anna quickly. "I'll give you individual counseling afterwards."

"Oh?" said Jim nastily. "I reckon you've done enough talking, lady. Who do you think you are anyway, coming in here with us all undressed?"

"I can assure you, nakedness means nothing to me."

"Okay, then take *your* goddamned clothes off!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" roared the team.

Anna backed toward the door. "This is very good. I like the way it's going. We're letting it all hang out. That is to say, not literally hang out, I wouldn't want you to think — "

"What in God's name is going on in here?"

"Oh, Mrs. Masterson," cried Anna, relieved. "It's just our post-game grief counseling. We won't be long. Did you want me for anything?" she asked hopefully.

The squat and toadlike figure of Mrs. Masterson surveyed the fleshy contents of the locker room. "Is Bill Todd-Mortimer present?"

"Here!" A haggard figure spoke from the distant recesses of the room.

"Are you all right, Bill? They didn't...break your skin in any way?"

"Just the usual cuts and bruises in the line of duty, Mrs. Masterson."

"No, uh, bites or anything like that?"

"Bites?"

"Bites, as with teeth." She surveyed the team with glittering eyes. "Carl Steffen has just notified me that several of his sheep sustained serious bites while being removed from the field by Lupworth United. I think you will agree this is unusual. So I advise all of you to take no chances. Go to your doctor and get shots."

In the amazed silence that followed, Bill Todd-Mortimer was heard to say, "I knew there was something weird about those guys."

Sunday morning, and a lined and elderly face stared out of the visiphone screen trying to look sincere and honest. The sincerity came across well because a desperate plea was being made. The honesty lacked conviction however, because the call came from Yamton Penitentiary. The face belonged to Wally Masterson.

"Stasis?" snapped Mrs. Masterson. "What do you mean, stasis? You're supposed to be doing time, for God's sake!"

"These days they allow stasis as an alternative. I've applied for it. All I need now is a recommendation from you. Prior good behavior, that kind of thing."

Wally was a tricky little devil — that was how he'd gotten away with embezzlement for so long — but he couldn't fool her. "You want me to recommend you for suspended animation, is that what you're saying?"

He licked his lips. "Something like that."

"For the full term? That would be ten years?"

"Nine. I've served one." The long face was twisted in supplication. "It's been hell, Rachel. I'll never see the light of day again, at my age."

"And rightly so! You have a debt to pay to Society, Walter Masterson, and by God you're going to pay it! There's too much pandering to criminals these days. Private showers, 3V in all rooms, fresh linen daily. Horseback riding, yachting, all at the taxpayers' expense. It makes me sick!"

"So you'll write the Governor a recommendation for stasis? You wouldn't want me to spend nine years yachting, would you?"

Mrs. Masterson snorted. How dare that little wimp use his sarcasm on her! Wally needed time to reflect on the error of his ways. Nine years would be about enough. "Hell will freeze over, Wally," she snapped, "before I recommend you for stasis! But meanwhile I need to pick your brains. No doubt you recall the Choth insurrection on Sol Station 2?"

There was a mutinous expression on his face. "You mean when your dad panicked and loosed off his laser pistol at his own reflection? And you tried to shoot the Security Chief and got yourself deported?"

"Your recollection of events is at variance with mine, Wally. My father did not panic, but he was ninety-three and his eyesight was failing. Be that as it may, with him dead there was a regrettable lack of leadership and I sought to fill the vacuum. I was foiled only by Security buffoons. But all that is beside the point. Tell me, what was the final outcome of the Choth insurrection? What happened to the Choth after I left the Station?"

"Well now, wouldn't you like to know."

The impertinence of the man! "Wally, I warn you! There are sinister happenings in Foss Creek that bear a marked resemblance to the happenings prior to the Choth insurrection! Now answer my question. I can find out from other sources if you persist in this stubbornness!"

"No, you can't. It was all hushed up. The records were destroyed and people's memories were doctored. I slipped through the net. There was something about the Choth, you see, that really scared people. They were like a horrible legend come true. Much better to forget the whole thing." He was grinning wickedly.

"Tell me, you fool!"

"Not until hell freezes over," he said distinctly. "If then."

"Weren't you a little hard on him, Rachel?" asked Megan Jenkins as Mrs. Masterson resumed their interrupted morning coffee.

"Hard?" exclaimed the old lady. "My God, he's lucky his case was heard on Earth. If he'd been convicted on Sol Station 2 it would have been the trepan for him. There's no room for embezzlers on Sol Station 2, thank God!"

"But Rachel...." Megan was horrified. "How can you talk like that? He's your husband!"

"Which proves my judgment is unbiased. Wally is a dirty little crook who deserves all he gets. Lucky for him my father's dead. He'd have

horsewhipped the wretch for the way he took the family name and disgraced it! You know what's wrong with the criminal justice system?"

"Crooks get off too lightly?" guessed Megan.

Mrs. Masterson shot her a suspicious look. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was insincerity. Allowing her friend the benefit of the doubt, she continued, "Precisely, and this application of Wally's is a prime example. What's jail for, eh? Punishment, in the form of confinement and endless boredom relieved by moments of degradation, right? So what does Wally apply for? Stasis, for God's sake. Stasis!"

"I suppose it's cheaper that way. Food and accommodation, I mean. I'm told they keep them in big filing cabinets in a deep freeze."

"But don't you see, you fool? Stasis means he'll wake up without even knowing nine years have gone by. Where's the punishment in that, eh? And all the time he's cozily asleep, I'll be getting older. By the time he's released he'll be fitter and sharper than I, and he'll be able to run rings around me, the slippery little swine!"

"I doubt that will ever happen, Rachel."

Again there was something suspect in Megan's tone, and Mrs. Masterson was about to react unfavorably when the visiphone buzzed again. With an oath the old lady activated the screen. Didn't people know better than to keep calling on a Sunday morning? Shouldn't they all be in church?

It was Carl Steffen. "You're responsible for that goddamned soccer team, eh?" he snapped.

"I am Manager of Foss Creek Contemptibles, although I fail to see the relevance of such a question on a Sunday morning."

"That's a Yes, is it? Okay, lady, so get your butt up to my farm right now, and bring Todd-Mortimer with you!"

"Really! I will not be spoken to — "

"If you want to use my meadow as a soccer ground in future, that is."

"I see." She switched off the screen, flushing. First Wally and now Steffen. What had happened to good old country courtesy this morning? "Why are you hanging around here, woman?" she snapped at Megan. "Can't you see I have business to attend to?"

"No, I can't allow that," said Gervaise Todd-Mortimer firmly, as they approached Carl Steffen's farm. "It's simply not on, you know."

Mrs. Masterson was using the short journey as an opportunity to discuss team tactics. "Nonsense! Players switch teams all the time. All I'm suggesting is your son sign on as Lupworth United's goalkeeper for the next couple of weeks, and convey intelligence to me. Then, shortly before the Cup Final, he transfer back to us. Nothing could be simpler."

"Spying? It's unethical. And anyway, Bill was badly frightened by United. You'd never persuade him to join such a peculiar outfit."

Mrs. Masterson snorted. "Peculiar, yes. That's what I want to get to the bottom of. That's why I ordered Jim Bullock to disable the United goalkeeper, so your son could take his place."

"What!" Gervaise Todd-Mortimer stiffened with outrage. "You mean Jim deliberately crippled that man?" He took a deep breath. "Please accept my resignation from the Committee of the Foss Creek Contemptibles Soccer Club, Mrs. Masterson."

"Gladly. Now, as to the matter of young Bill — " She broke off. They'd turned into the driveway of Steffen's farm, and the house had come into view.

It seemed to be surrounded by sheep.

"Hungry, are they?" suggested the veterinarian.

Mrs. Masterson grunted. "It is as I expected. Carl Steffen is under siege." She stamped on the brake as a sheep wandered in front of the buggy.

"Under siege? Don't be ridiculous...." He broke off, staring. "My God! Look at the expression on the face of that sheep!"

"Quintessential evil, I think you will agree. The Mark of Cain."

Todd-Mortimer recovered quickly. As he'd found out to his cost on other occasions, it was possible to fall under the spell of the peculiar dream world in which Mrs. Masterson lived. "Just a fleeting impression. Sheep always look at you weirdly; ask Steffen. They drive him crazy with their staring. No, these sheep are merely waiting to be fed."

"I think you will find we are in the presence of something infinitely more sinister," said Mrs. Masterson significantly.

This seemed to be borne out as they approached the house. Sheep crowded the buggy, snarling. The terrified face of Steffen peered from a window. He flung it open. "Drive right up to the door! Don't let the bastards get near you!"

Mrs. Masterson pulled up immediately beside the front door and killed the engine. As the buggy sank to the ground, hooves scrabbled at the

windows and a host of woolly faces stared in, red eyed, jaws agape and slavering. Steffen cracked open the front door of the house, immediately adjacent to the car. Mrs. Masterson opened her door and stepped quickly through, followed by the veterinarian. A sheep tried to force itself between the buggy and the wall and became trapped, snarling and snapping. Steffen slammed the front door behind them.

"By Jesus," he muttered. "What a morning." He took a deep breath and confronted Mrs. Masterson. "So. What do you have to say for yourself, woman?"

"I fail to understand what you're talking about."

He began to check off points on trembling fingers. "I allow your goddamned soccer team to play on my field. Yesterday the players chased my ewes all over the place and grappled with them. Sheep were bitten, and this morning they try to attack me. The connection is obvious. Jesus Christ, woman, I barely escaped with my life!"

"If you remember, it was Lupworth United who grappled with your sheep. They are beyond my area of responsibility, as well you know."

"Lupworth United, Foss Creek Contemptibles, what's the difference? As a result of injuries sustained while being removed from the soccer pitch, my ewes have contracted a mystery illness."

"I can't talk to you, you clown." Mrs. Masterson swung round on Todd-Mortimer. "You've seen the sheep. What's your diagnosis?"

"Give me a chance. I haven't examined them yet. When did you first notice these symptoms, Carl?"

"At daybreak when they started hurling themselves at my front door, trying to get at me." Steffen mopped his brow. "I tell you, I've had it with sheep, and the hell with local color. They tell me llamas can be quite docile."

Todd-Mortimer had opened the window and was regarding the ewe trapped between car and wall, directly beneath him. "Do they seem to be frightened of water, at all?"

"Rabies, you mean?" Steffen uttered a bark of laughter. "Rabies was eradicated fifty years ago!"

The veterinarian drew himself up. "A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, Carl. However, I don't think...." He leaned out of the window. "The explanation could be quite simple. An extremely painful

eye infection has spread through the flock — notice the redness, the inflammation as we call it in the medical profession? These animals are mad with pain. Treat the eyes and you solve the problem."

"Okay, treat them, then," said Carl Steffen nastily. "And good luck to you."

"I will treat the animal beneath us as a test case; I think I can reach her from here." He took a bottle from his bag, soaked a cloth and leaned out of the window again. "A spot of argyrol will do the trick, I think... There we are. Did you say something, Mrs. Masterson?"

Mrs. Masterson, who was reading the label on the bottle, had in fact grunted skeptically. "I hardly think this snake oil will solve anything."

"Argyrol is a recognized and well-respected palliative in cases of eye infection." He glanced out of the window. "The animal is already calming down."

They joined him. Incredibly, he was right. The ewe had stopped snarling and stood quietly, gazing up at them with mild eyes.

"That's the irony of the medical profession," said Todd-Mortimer. "No matter how efficacious the remedy itself, you still need the good old human element to diagnose and prescribe. Argyrol is almost forgotten now, a drug of the twentieth century. But the point is, I remembered it. And now we have the means to save your flock, Carl."

Mrs. Masterson was wondering at a strange expression on Steffen's face; was it disappointment? Then something else caught her eye. "Take a look at that, Todd-Mortimer," she snapped. "You will observe that all the other animals are calming down too. The sickness has run its course. So much for your miracle cure. It was pure coincidence, no more. The bane of the research scientist."

The sheep were moving away from the house, drifting quietly through a broken fence into a meadow, bleating, dropping their heads and beginning to graze on the short spring grass. "Well, I'm damned," said Steffen. "You never know, with sheep. I've always said so."

"Perhaps I should treat the rest of the flock now," suggested Todd-Mortimer. "As a precautionary measure."

"Forget it, Gervaise. This has cost me enough already. And besides...." The curious expression returned to Steffen's rough features. "Never mind."

"Fools!" snapped Mrs. Masterson. "You think this is the end of it? This kind of complacency almost cost us Sol Station 2! It started with just such an outbreak as this. Red eyes and a great deal of snarling and slavering."

"They have sheep on Sol Station 2?" asked Steffen, surprised.

"Sheep? No, of course they don't have sheep, you blockhead. I'm talking about people like you and me; honest human citizens infected by the bite of the Choth, who had been invited aboard against my expert advice and who had risen against us. If only people had listened to me, my father would be alive today!"

"Unless he'd died since from unrelated causes."

"Exactly, and within hours of the Choth attack a full-blown insurrection broke out. And this time human fought human, red eyed, snarling and slavering."

"All of them?" Todd-Mortimer was interested from a professional standpoint. "All of them slavering?"

Mrs. Masterson uttered a click of impatience. "Do I have to spell it out? Slavering humans fought non-slavering humans."

"What about the Choth? Were they slavering or non-slavering?"

"The Choth always slaver. And if you don't realize why some of the humans were slavering too, it was because they'd been infected by the bites of the Choth. Fighting to preserve peace, my father was killed." She regarded them solemnly. "It was a great loss to the Service."

"Well, too bad," said Steffen. "But I fail to see what that has to do with my sheep. We have no Choth here, do we? What do they look like, anyway?"

"Humanoid. Tall. Hairy, particularly about the hands. Long muzzle-like jaws and pointed teeth. They visited Earth centuries ago, which accounts for certain myths."

"Myths? Wait a minute," said Steffen. "Just wait a goddamned minute. You can't be suggesting — "

"Precisely, Mr. Steffen. Your animals may appear quiescent at the moment, but that is their cunning. Be advised, Mr. Steffen, you have a flock of weresheep out there."

"And all they did was laugh, which shows how professional standards have slipped in recent years. Here I present them with a perfectly

acceptable explanation for the curious behavior of not only the sheep, but Lupworth United too, and they laugh. I told them: today Lupworth United, tomorrow the world! But they were unable to grasp that simple concept. Sometimes I wonder if the peaceful life of the country has a numbing effect on the intellect."

Sunday afternoon in Mrs. Masterson's cottage. Her audience consisted of Anna Tyler, whom she'd called in to discuss the psychological implications of yesterday's game, and Megan Jenkins, who made a useful foil.

"But why did the sheep all calm down?" asked Megan.

"Certainly not because of any muck that fool Todd-Masterson used, because he only treated one animal. My guess is it had been happening for some hours, gradually, at the setting of the full moon. Mark my words, the beast still lurks within those sheep. As it lurks within Lupworth United, waiting only for the next full moon to unleash its devilish potential."

"Lupworth United are werewolves too? Really, Rachel, isn't that a little far-fetched?" But Megan glanced nervously out of the window as though expecting to see Dexter Brood himself hiding in the bushes, needle-fanged and slobbering.

"The evidence was right before our eyes and we failed to see it. The pre-game howling. The way they combined in offense instinctively — just like a pack of wolves hunting. The barely controlled threat toward young Bill Todd-Mortimer. Fortunately for him he recognized it for what it was, and fled. Otherwise, I shudder to think what might have ensued."

Anna Tyler was doubtful. "Well, what *would* have ensued?"

"As I told you: I shudder to think."

"Yes, but you must shudder to think something. You can't just shudder. There has to be some possibility that you're shuddering at."

"Must I spell it out, woman? If young Bill hadn't fled, they would have torn him limb from limb!"

"I hardly think so. My guess is, they'd have patted him on the back the way soccer players do, and resumed play. To me, a pat on the back is much more likely than unprovoked dismemberment. I think most people would agree with me."

"I certainly wouldn't. Knowing the Choth the way I do."

"The Choth? What have the Choth to do with all this?"

"The Choth were involved in the slaying of Mrs. Masterson's father, the Admiral," Megan reminded Anna.

"Unfortunately Sol Station 2 does not experience a full moon as such," the old lady explained, "there being few exterior portholes. If it were otherwise, the more intelligent crew members would have agreed with my diagnosis soon enough. As it was, the Choth acted in accordance with their internal time clock and rose as one man, or should I say one alien. When my poor father fell, I made every effort to take over the Station but Security was staffed with dunderheads, and force of arms prevented me."

"You paint an intriguing picture, Mrs. Masterson," said Anna. "I almost wish I'd been there. Although I must object to the use of the word werewolf. The Choth are lunar afflicted persons through no fault of their own."

Their host snatched a book from the coffee table. "Clearly you are not aware of the gravity of the situation. I suggest you listen to a learned opinion." She started to read. "'Those gifted with the power of changing their form tend to assume a festial personality.' Now, cast your mind back to yesterday's game, and tell me what those words convey to you." She stared fixedly at Anna, and when the sociologist's eyes dropped she shifted her gaze to Megan. "Revealing, isn't it?"

"You're suggesting Lupworth United behaved in a festial manner?" quavered her neighbor. "They *were* a little odd, but festial? I don't like the sound of that."

Anna Tyler's tone was severe. "Really, Mrs. Masterson, I find this kind of talk distressing. Merely because these afflicted persons — afflicted by *our* standards, remember — behave in a manner you consider unusual is no reason to accuse them of festiality. I'm speaking of the Choth on Sol Station 2, of course. You have not yet made a credible connection between the Choth on Sol Station 2 and Lupworth United here on Earth. Festial personality? I hardly think so."

"You're talking in riddles as usual, woman. I said bestial personality."

"You said festial."

"All right." Mrs. Masterson handed her the book. "Read it yourself."

Anna glanced at the page. "Yes, it says bestial personality here, so obviously you misread it. My God!" she exclaimed. "Have you seen what

this book is, Megan?" She held it up to show the jacket, a bold representation of a pinkly naked woman in the arms of a black-cloaked, sharp-fanged villain. "*Myths and Monsters of Mediæval Times.*" She closed it with a sharp report. "Hardly your dependable work of reference, huh? So how do you propose to stop werewolves taking over the South Western Soccer League, Mrs. Masterson? Open fire with silver bullets?"

"That is quite the most ridiculous suggestion I've heard today, and I've spent some time with Gervaise Todd-Mortimer already. Everyone knows the story of silver bullets is a myth. In the early stages of the insurrection on Sol Station 2 I shot two Choth dead with silver bullets I'd cast myself as an experiment. It was soon revealed they'd died because of my accuracy, not because of any mystical properties of silver. I'd shot them through the heart."

"So how do you propose we handle this problem, Mrs. Masterson? If there is a problem. Perhaps we should face the real truth, that Lupworth United are a better team than Foss Creek Contemptibles."

"There are broader issues, as I've told you," said the old lady darkly. "I'd hoped this discussion might have been productive of a solution, but I should have known better. No. My only course may be to call my husband at Yamton Penitentiary and make certain concessions in return for information. I'm not looking forward to it. Wally has a frugal personality and will always drive a hard bargain."

"Are you sure you don't mean a brugal personality?" asked Anna Tyler innocently.

THE NEXT WEEK PASSED without incident until Friday evening, when Mrs. Masterson opened her door in response to a frantic knocking and found Bill Todd-Mortimer standing there. Glancing nervously over his shoulder he hurried indoors and flopped into a chair, blinking at the light.

"I can't do it, Mrs. Masterson. No way. I don't care what you tell Dad about me and Janet Remmers, I'm through."

She regarded him, frustrated. What a prime example of the spineless youth of today! He looked pale and shrunken, his clothing unkempt, his hair over-long. What he needed was a few years in the Space Service; that

might make a man of him, if it wasn't too late already. "Janet Remmers is not the kind of girl with whom your father would like you to associate," she said significantly.

"I know that! And I don't care! You tell him! Go on, pick up the phone and tell him! I'm calling your bluff!"

A different approach was needed. Bill was a good lad, basically; merely a victim of poor parenting. "I never bluff. Let us discuss this quietly and rationally, Bill, man to man. Clearly something has frightened you, and I accept that. You may speak freely."

He dropped his gaze. "It's Dexter Brood," he muttered.

"I thought it might be. Tell me what happened, in your own words."

"Eh? Whose words did you expect me to use?"

"Your own. That's what I said. Omit nothing."

Her voice seemed to calm him, as a Foss Creek sheep calms at the waning of the moon. He relaxed visibly, took a deep breath, and began.

"I called Mr. Brood at Lupworth like you said, and said I was interested in playing for him, and could I have a trial. That's the way you do it, see; you ask for a trial. I didn't tell Dad or the men; they wouldn't understand. Anyway, Mr. Brood was interested because his goalkeeper is still in hospital, compound fracture, he'll be on crutches for months. I'll say this for Jim Bullock, he does a good job."

"Yes, yes. A sound young man. Get on with it, please."

"You said omit nothing. Anyway, I went to Lupworth this morning and they put me in goal and fired balls at me and I did okay, I guess, because Mr. Brood asked me to call him Dexter. He had the papers all ready for me to sign. Just one thing, he said. Our men all take these shots. And he had the hypodermic all full and ready."

"Hypodermic, eh? No question of biting, then? So that's how he does it."

"Monkey-gland treatment, he called it. He said soccer teams had been using it for centuries. He said it wasn't a performance-enhancing drug or anything illegal like that; it was all natural ingredients, like granola. But I backed off. He had a funny look in his eye. Kind of...*gloating*, you know what I mean?"

"You've had a very narrow escape, young Bill." She should never have sent him unprotected to Lupworth. She'd allowed her enthusiasm for the team to sap her common sense.

"I'm real funny about hypodermics; I've seen Dad use them on animals too often. Sometimes the animal drops down dead, just like that. Embolism, Dad says, luck of the draw, he says. I don't like to take chances."

"So you made good your escape."

"I said I had to get something from my buggy. When I reached it I jumped in and drove off." His eyes were wide, reliving the flight. "And the whole team came running after me, howling. Then later I saw their team copter humming around up there. I pulled under some trees until it was gone. But they knew which way I'd be heading, all right."

"They won't come after you now, Bill. Brood was driven by disappointment, nothing more. He doesn't realize the value of your intelligence to me."

"But I didn't find anything out."

"You found out enough." She stood. "You have confirmed my suspicions, and I thank you. The matter of Janet Remmers and the abortion clinic will go no further, have no fear. And now...." She sighed. "I have no option but to call my wretch of a husband."

It was not an easy course for a proud woman to take and Mrs. Masterson procrastinated, hoping to be overtaken by events, such as a change in legislation governing stasis or a tragic accident involving the Lupworth United copter and the entire team. Saturday afternoon arrived without incident, however. Foss Creek Contemptibles beat Galton Town by four goals to one. It was during Anna Tyler's subsequent triumph counseling that Gervaise Todd-Mortimer dropped the bombshell.

Smiling round at the jubilant team, he remarked, "This bodes well for the twenty-second."

Mrs. Masterson corrected him. "The twenty-ninth. The Cup Final is on the twenty-ninth, my good man. A fine set of fools we'd have looked if we'd showed up for the game on the twenty-second."

"The date's been changed," said Anna Tyler. "Didn't you know?"

"No, I did not know. Changed? Why was I not informed, as Team Manager? Who made this decision, anyway?"

The veterinarian said uncomfortably, "Obviously there's been a breakdown in communication. Dexter Brood put in a request to the South

Western League; something to do with Lupworth's crowded fixture card. Anna and I agreed as a matter of course. It's a trivial matter, surely?"

"A trivial matter?" Couldn't the imbeciles see the significance of the date? "A *trivial matter*? And you agreed without consulting me? Fools! Don't you understand *why* they wanted to change the date? Don't you know what the twenty-second is?"

They stared at her, baffled. The team crowded around the trio, naked and open-mouthed. A boardroom dispute. This was more fun than the game itself.

"It's exactly one lunar month from last week's game!" the old lady shouted. "Take a look at that calendar on the wall, and by the way I don't know how they can allow such disgusting pictures to be printed! The weekend of the twenty-second is the time of the full moon!"

"Oh, no," muttered Todd-Mortimer. "Not werewolves again."

"Werewolves?" someone repeated anxiously.

"There are no werewolves," said Anna Tyler quickly, sensing alarm and despondency spreading throughout the team. "There never were any werewolves. It's all a myth!"

"Yeah, just let me tell you all what happened to me over at Lupworth," said Bill Todd-Mortimer.

"Werewolves?" The whisper spread rapidly. People began to recall odd incidents in the previous week's game. Things began to fit together. A pattern formed in fertile young minds. Consternation spread.

"I always said there was something weird about those guys," said Bill Todd-Mortimer.

Swiftly, capably, Anna Tyler switched her approach from triumph to grief counseling, while Mrs. Masterson hurried home to her visiphone.

"Wally, you may now tell me what happened on Sol Station 2 after my departure. The future of the human race is at risk, and although I have little time for the human race as such, I have no wish to lose the conveniences of Society."

"You mean you'll recommend me for stasis?" The joy in the little toad's face was pathetic to see.

"You have my word as a gentleman, as it were. Provided your information is satisfactory."

"Wait a minute. Just wait one goddamned minute, Rachel. I've known you a long time. How do you define satisfactory?"

"It must result in the victory of Foss Creek Contemptibles over Lupworth United at the South Western Cup Final."

"What's that got to do with anything?" he asked, puzzled. Mrs. Masterson began a succinct explanation of recent events, and after a while he began to nod intelligently. "Yeah, yeah," he said finally. "I get the picture. Okay, you have a deal. Now, listen carefully. This is what happened. Soon after you were thrown off the Station there was a clamp-down. The whole place was in quarantine and movement was restricted; you know how easy it is for panic to spread in a Station."

"I know," said Mrs. Masterson with feeling.

"Communication with the outside world was cut off. You can guess why that was. They didn't want news to leak out that we'd got werewolves aboard; you know how sensitive people are about werewolves. If they *were* werewolves. So the Choth were loaded into their old ship and sent away. Those of us who'd been infected were cured."

"How?"

"I don't remember."

"You *must* remember. Try, you fool! I'm warning you, Wally!"

His voice took on a plaintive whine. "I'm doing my best, Rachel. People's memories were selectively erased. Hell, some of us didn't even remember our own names, afterwards. But you know what memory erasure's like; it works in patches. I could remember more than most. I remember you being shipped out, and that guy stowing away, all that stuff."

Mrs. Masterson's ears pricked up. "A stowaway? On my shuttle? I never heard about that."

"Jesus, yes." He chuckled. "There was a helluva stink when they found him gone. Rankin Sanders, his name was, you probably wouldn't remember him. People reckoned he'd been the first human infected by the Choth, and it had really taken a hold on him by then. Me, I was lucky, I never let the Choth near me. But they'd have arrested Sanders when the shuttle reached Earth, wouldn't they?"

"There was no search. It's possible word got through too late. Would he be a big man, hairy, widow's peak?"

"That's him."

"He is now masquerading under the name of Dexter Brood," she said with certainty. "Well, now we know with whom we're dealing, but there's little I can do about it except take my twelve-bore to the swine, and I have no wish to face a murder trial at my age. No, Wally, I regret that without details of the cure for this malady, I cannot recommend you for stasis."

She could almost see his crooked little mind racing. It was ironic that the fate of the human race had to depend on such as him. "You mentioned your veterinarian buddy," he said finally, "and the sheep. Did the animal he treated calm down before the rest, or at the same time?"

Now there was an interesting line of thought. Wally could be onto something. "To the best of my recollection, that ewe became quiescent almost five minutes before the others," she said slowly. "I remember because that dolt Todd-Mortimer had time for a bout of childish boasting."

"There you are, then." He glanced over his shoulder, a habit of his before imparting information. "Now let's run through that sequence of events again, and maybe I'll have an idea or two...."

During the next two weeks, Foss Creek residents were pleasantly surprised by Mrs. Masterson's lack of activity. Certainly she attended an away Contemptibles fixture, but it was reported that she confined herself to shouting epithets at the opposition and had not engaged in any controversy. The Contemptibles had won handily; a good warm-up for the Cup Final. The Final itself was to be played at Foss Creek; Lupworth having waived the neutral ground option in return for Contemptibles agreeing to the changed date. Amazingly, Mrs. Masterson made no attempt to get the original date of the Final restored.

So at one o'clock on Saturday, 22 April, the Lupworth United copter descended toward Foss Creek out of a clear blue sky. The narrow lanes were choked with buggies from Yamton Dome and surrounding areas, and temporary stands were being bolted together by the villagers. The South Western Knockout Cup Final was by far the most important event of the year, from the tourism point of view. The Newspocket cameras were there, all set to broadcast the event live from London to Land's End.

Gervaise Todd-Mortimer, who had retracted his resignation until after the Final, met Anna Tyler outside the Contemptibles' locker room.

"Here come Lupworth." He watched the red-eyed and unshaven opposition climbing from their copter. "They look a little under the weather today. This bodes well for Contemptibles. By the way, where's Mrs. Masterson?" He cocked an ear toward the locker room door. "It's time she gave the pep talk. I don't hear her voice in there. Perhaps," a welcome thought occurred, "she's ill, too."

"It would take a serious illness indeed to keep her away from the Cup Final," said Anna. "You realize her involvement with the team stems from loneliness? With her husband in jail, the team is all she has. Anyway, her buggy's parked over there."

In fact Mrs. Masterson was less than ten meters away, having arrived earlier. Together with Megan Jenkins she was busy in the utility room behind the locker rooms. Here were stored the goal nets, the spare balls, the corner flags and the ancient ground-effect mower, together with a clutter of farm implements and old sacks of herbicide and fertilizer accumulated over the years. Here also was the hot-water tank and the air-conditioning plant.

"Oh, my God," Megan was muttering. "Oh, my God. I can't think how I ever got into this. I wish you'd explain what you're doing, Rachel. On second thoughts, I don't want to know. No, tell me. I may refuse to be involved."

"Stop your whimpering, woman, and keep a sharp look-out. The fewer who know about this the better, and I have no doubt you would crack under interrogation. This is no time for cowardice. The fate of the human race is in our hands!"

Megan eased the door open and peered out. "They've arrived. Oh, my God, Lupworth have arrived. I'm not cut out for this kind of thing. What shall I do if someone wants to come in here?"

"Deny them entry. Fend them off." Mrs. Masterson busied herself at the far wall. "Can you see that imbecile Todd-Mortimer? I asked him to bring his veterinary supplies in case there was a problem with the sheep again."

"Mr. Todd-Mortimer has his bag. The sheep are all penned in the field below. They seem to be crowding the fence. They're acting very strangely."

"Of course they're acting strangely, you fool. It is the time of the full moon and they sense the presence of kindred spirits."

"But they're dangerous! Why haven't they been dealt with? If you're right, they only have to bite someone and they turn into a... a werewolf!"

"Exactly. But try telling that to Carl Steffen. He likes them this way. He says they put on wool at a phenomenal rate. And between you and me, Megan, their very wolfishness appeals to something in that man. Take a deep look into Steffen's eyes the next time you meet him. Tell me what you see there."

"Really, I'd rather not, Rachel."

Mrs. Masterson uttered a grunt of satisfaction, her first task complete. "There. All ready now, I think. Yes, I hear them next door." The sound of howling carried through the dividing wall. "All that savagery, so barely held in check. It would be quite inspiring, were it not the enemy. Now, you hold the fort, Megan. I shall be gone less than a minute."

She left her companion moaning with terror and walked briskly around the side of the building.

"Ah, there you are, Mrs. Masterson." Gervaise Todd-Mortimer was relieved. "The lads will be expecting your pre-game pep talk."

"All in good time." She leaned casually against the Lupworth door and, behind her back, slipped a key in the lock and turned it. "I have a few further tasks to perform." She hurried back to the utility room.

"You can't come in! You can't come in!"

"It's me, you fool. Step aside, there's no time to lose." She returned to the far wall. "There. That should settle their hash."

The howling died away. Shouts of discomfort filtered through the wall. "What have you done, Rachel?" quavered Megan. "In God's name, what have you done?"

The shouts turned to yelping screams. There was a distant pounding of fists on the door. "Time to leave, Megan. Nobody will come here, now the diversion has commenced. Your part in this day's work is done."

"My part in *what*?" But Megan's agonized questions faded as she put distance between herself and the utility room. "And why are you wearing that awful *mask*?"

Mrs. Masterson listened to the din from the Lupworth locker room with satisfaction. That should take some of the steam out of them. When she judged they'd had enough, she removed the tear-gas canister from the air-conditioner, slipped it into a larger cylindrical container, screwed the

lid down tightly and removed her mask. She walked casually to her buggy, locked the container inside and joined the throng outside the locker-room door, which by now was shaking to heavy blows from both sides.

"What in heaven's name is going on?" she asked.

"There are lads dying in there!" Todd-Mortimer cried. "This is a terrible thing! They accept our hospitality and now this happens. I feel personally responsible for this tragedy!"

"If you hadn't retracted your resignation you wouldn't feel so responsible, you fool. Anyway, they don't sound as though they're dying, although they may need some medical attention when they emerge. Why don't you let them out, for heaven's sake?"

"Nobody can find the key!"

"Key? Oh, it so happens I might have a spare." She rummaged in the pockets of her tweed jacket. "Here we are. The work of a moment."

The door burst open and Lupworth United emerged at speed, headed by Dexter Brood and bringing with them a powerful odor of sweat and tear gas. They milled around half-naked, coughing and rubbing streaming eyes. Eventually Brood was able to identify Todd-Mortimer and staggered up to him.

"You bastards! Sabotage, that's what this is. I'm going to make a formal complaint to the South Western League. You'll pay for this, Todd-Mortimer!"

Mrs. Masterson intervened. "A most unfortunate accident, the air conditioner must have sucked some kind of herbicide in from the utility room. Dangerous stuff, herbicide, when it gets in the eyes. Fortunately Mr. Todd-Mortimer has an excellent antiseptic in his bag."

"For God's sake, Mrs. Masterson, I'm not a doctor!"

"You would withhold succor from these poor wretches on a technicality? Answer me this, man! Is argyrol suitable for application to human eyes or not?"

"Yes, but — "

"Then apply it, Todd-Mortimer!"

Lupworth United crowded around the veterinarian, coughing and weeping, begging for his palliative. "Oh, Jesus," someone wailed. "I'm going blind!"

"Do your duty, Todd-Mortimer! Remember the Hippocratic Oath!"

Public pressure was overwhelming. The veterinarian bowed to it, opened his bag and poured a generous measure of argyrol onto a swab. One by one Lupworth United received treatment, finishing with Dexter Brood himself. "There's something goddamned strange about this," he jerked out between bouts of coughing. "I'm going to take a look at that utility room."

"Praise be to God!" someone shouted joyfully. "I can see!"

"Just jog around a bit now," Mrs. Masterson advised them. "Get some air into your lungs. You'll be all right. Meanwhile we'll get some fresh air into this room."

Within five minutes Lupworth United were able to return to the locker room. Brood gave Todd-Mortimer a suspicious backward glance as the door closed behind him. "All right, men!" they heard him cry. "Let's hear that old Lupworth howl!"

But the response was feeble. After repeated exhortations from their manager, an impatient voice was heard to reply, "The hell with the Lupworth howl, that's kid's stuff. We've come here to play soccer."

"You've what?" shouted Brood incredulously. But even his surprise sounded forced and insincere.

Mrs. Masterson favored Todd-Mortimer with a rare and delicate smile. "Argyrol, you see, Gervaise. It contains silver."

Her meaning sank in gradually. "Oh, no. You're not still riding that hobby-horse, are you?"

He was still shaking his head when the two teams trotted out of their locker rooms and lined up for the Newspocket pre-game interviews.

After all the excitement, the game itself was an anticlimax. Ninety minutes passed pleasantly, Foss Creek Contemptibles defeating their opponents by six goals to one in a one-sided contest. A notable feature of Lupworth's play was their lack of cohesion and teamwork. As the final whistle sounded the players shook hands. The Contemptibles lined up to receive the Cup and the congratulations of the local dignitaries, while Lupworth United slunk off to face Dexter Brood.

Mrs. Masterson, involved in the congratulations, did not see quite how the brawl started outside the Lupworth locker room. By the time she became aware all was not well, Dexter Brood was in full flight toward the distant forest, pursued by most of Lupworth United.

At this juncture the police copter came into view.

* * *

"Dexter Brood was wanted by Unipol because of the Choth genes he'd brought back from Sol Station 2," Mrs. Masterson explained to Megan Jenkins, as the two women sat drinking sherry that evening. "Once a person is bitten, the gene is carried through the bloodstream, multiplying and attaching itself to one's very chromosomes. One becomes a different being, subject to the monthly Choth cycle. A werewolf."

"Ugh." Megan shuddered. "But I still don't understand how Lupworth United were cured of their, uh, werewolfishness."

"Silver, of course. Any fool knows werewolves can't take silver."

"But you told us the story of silver bullets is a myth!"

Mrs. Masterson stiffened. "My late father, the Admiral, taught me the value of flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. I have never denied the possibility of success with ancient remedies. I merely noted that argyrol, with which Todd-Mortimer cured the first sheep, contains silver. Applied to the eyes, it enters the bloodstream and attaches to the werewolf gene. This causes the gene to drop away from the chromosome. Yes, it's astonishing how often ancient knowledge comes to the aid of our beleaguered species."

"So are you going to call your husband and back his application for stasis?"

The old lady looked surprisingly cheerful in the face of a prospective defeat. "I am a woman of my word, and I shall do it now. By the way, it might be inadvisable to go outdoors for a while."

Within seconds the eager face of Wally appeared on the screen. "Did it work?"

"I am able to report one hundred percent success. I must say, Wally, you have a talent for the devious."

"So you'll recommend me for stasis?"

"Most certainly. And I have further good news for you, Wally. In order that we may resume our life together uninterrupted, I am applying for stasis too."

Conflicting emotions chased one another across the face on the screen. "You are? Nine years, you mean?"

"Nine years, Wally. We shall be together again in the blinking of an eye. Reunited."

She disconnected, cackling delightedly. Wally's face faded slowly from the screen, frozen open-mouthed.

"If that little creep thinks he can get the better of Rachel Masterson," said the old lady, "he can think again. My work in Foss Creek is finished. I shall rejoin Wally on his release and ensure he does nothing further to disgrace the family name."

"Are you sure there isn't another reason, Rachel?" asked Megan slyly. "I mean, it wouldn't be that you miss having him around, would it?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Nine years...." mused Megan. "It's a long time." A slow anticipatory smile spread over her face, to be replaced by sudden anxiety. "What's that? Did you hear something outside?"

There came a crash at the front door, and a dreadful snarling, worrying sound. Megan jumped up and ran to the window. Hereabouts the ancient cottages were set among tall, gnarled and ivy-covered trees climbing from the broad inlet to the shoulder of land comprising Carl Steffen's hobby farm.

Among the trees a pack of sheep was questing, wild-eyed and savage, drooling. Suddenly the figure of a man in rags burst from cover and sprinted off down the lane toward the village. The sheep sighted him and pounded in pursuit, bleating menacingly. Their quarry glanced over his shoulder with fear-crazed eyes. It was Dexter Brood.

"Yes, I guessed the sheep might flush him out." Mrs. Masterson joined Megan at the window. "So I released them. Useful animals, weresheep. Almost a pity the public outcry will result in their destruction."

As Brood and the sheep rounded a corner in the lane and disappeared from view, both the Newspocket and the Police copters appeared overhead, following the hunt as it moved north. The sounds diminished. A watery sun peered through the bare branches and peace descended once more on that quiet corner of Earth.

Mrs. Masterson sighed, bored already and looking forward to stasis. It would be good to have Wally back, if only for the opposition he provided.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

IF THE TRUTH BE TOLD, I enjoy putting the October/November issue together more than any other. I spend the entire year on it, moving the stories around, mixing and matching themes, and finding the right cover.

I believe that science fiction works best in the novella. Carolyn Ives Gilman proves that point with her wonderful story, "Candle in a Bottle." It's the tale of two brothers who travel to the "intellectual center of the universe." They meet with savants and scholars. One brother is accepted into the world, and the other — well, you'll see. The truly amazing thing about Carolyn's story, however, is the way she examines consciousness. You'll actually think differently after you've finished the story.

Perhaps my favorite Ray **Bradbury** stories are his dark tales. Just in time for Halloween, we have "The Finnegan," a story of doors and death and deep abiding terror.

Pat **Murphy** also provides a few chills with her fable, "Iris vs. the Black Knight." Iris awakens to a world filled with grays and blacks. When she went to sleep the night before, the world had been full of color. Who has stolen it? And why?

And, speaking of fables, **Tanith Lee** provides another one with a twist. In "The Reason for Not Going to the Ball," we learn why Cinderella's stepmother did all she could to keep her stepdaughter away from the palace.

October/November will provide even more good reading. We'll have stories from Gene **Wolfe**, **Michael Bishop**, and **Harlan Ellison**. We're saving lots of good fiction for future issues too. Upcoming, we have tales from mystery writer **Ed Gorman**, award-winner **Esther M. Friesner**, and best-selling author, **Steve Perry**. We have a new novella from Hugo-winner, **Timothy Zahn**, and a stunning cover story from **Adam-Troy Castro**. So find our subscription form. You don't want to miss an issue.


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BORAX! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? OR NOW? OR THEN?
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